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HAWK OF THE DESERT

DEDICATION

TO

R——

WHO HELPED ME SO MUCH

HAWK OF THE DESERT

A NOVEL

1914
B1252

BY G. E. MITTON

AUTHOR OF "IN THE GRIP OF THE WILD WA"
"THE GIFTS OF ENEMIES," ETC.

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HAWK OF THE DESERT

CHAPTER I

AT ASSUAN

"WHY isn't Durham here? Where's Durham, 'Ona? I don't see Durham," complained Edgar Pentland, pivoting round on the point of his walking-stick and peering at the swaying jostling crowd as if he were short-sighted. He wasn't in the least; this was only one of his peculiar little mannerisms. For once the almost automatic sedative invariably supplied by his wife failed him. She stood erect and eager, her flushed face alight with enthusiasm as she drank in the marvellous scene around. For this she had lived! Somewhere in the world she had known that there must be entrancing places like this! Earnestly for the seven years of her married life had she sought to persuade her husband to take her to one of them, and now it was achieved!

Assuan railway station! A railway station this? She could have laughed for pure joy. The leaning palms sprang out of the sandy platform, unfenced in any way; in the background were the brilliant vagrant heads of the poinsettias; whilst a motley crowd, in every known colour and garment, surged around. Until the train had actually stopped, a

line of ragged unkempt scamps, clothed in pieces of dirty coloured stuff hitched on anyhow, had stood waiting with ropes round their necks. It was quite natural to mistake them for criminals being conveyed to gaol by the thick-set Sudani policeman behind. But, when with a wild whirl, they flung themselves on the miscellaneous belongings of the passengers, and began tying them together with their ropes, it was impossible to doubt that they were porters. Some of them had first hurled themselves into the compartment next to that in which the Pentlands had come up from Luxor, and had laid hands on the gun-cases, tin basins and other oddments of two burnt-faced young officers there, who summarily ejected them, so that they tumbled headlong into the next, and began fighting with the gang already there, thrusting their metal discs animatedly into the faces of the new-comers.

Maurice Temple, a fair-haired boy, who had been a fellow-traveller with the Pentlands from Luxor, was the first to grasp the situation, and selecting two or three discs, firmly repelled the rest of the group until comparative peace reigned.

"A fine colour contrast," he remarked nonchalantly, as he stepped out on to the platform—"one a little sandy-looking cuss that might be a Cockney, the other a huge black-faced beast! Any others you fancy to add to the collection?"

Iona Pentland looked at him in quick response, but answered irrelevantly. "It's just heaven!" she remarked, whereat a tall responsible-looking fellow-countryman who was passing, grinned with amusement; he had to spend most of his days here, and his ideas of heaven were naturally otherwise.

"But Durham isn't here; where is Durham? I don't see him, 'Ona," broke in Edgar's plaintive

chant. His egregious shortening of her christian name had long ceased to worry his wife, but at his voice the glory evaporated and vanished.

"He'll be here in a moment, or we shall find a note at the hotel," she responded soothingly.

"Suppose you go outside to the hotel trap," suggested Temple. "I'm just enjoying this scramble. I'll see to your things. Lance Durham isn't lost, so Mr. Pentland needn't worry about him. He's expecting me too, you know, and I guess he'll turn up."

"Yes, come along." Iona caught her husband's arm and pressed him, still expostulating, through the crowd. Even then she had time to notice those "thumb-nail" effects which so delighted her. An old white-bearded native, in voluminous skirts, retrieving his luggage from the van, said luggage consisting of a palm-leaf mat folded round his belongings and tied with a rope across and across; the moist dark-faced engine driver in blue dungaree, with a red handkerchief twisted round his shaven head, who had alighted from his foot-plate and was kissing the hands of a "holy man" in an ecstasy of adoration; a huge Turk in uniform bearing a striking resemblance to a well-known Irish M.P.; a tiny little girl with a shining boot-black face, and her hair rattling round her in innumerable wee pigtails. All these flashed in and out of vision before Iona reached the neat hotel trap with smart servants in attendance.

An hour later they were all three in the peaceful verandah of the famous Cataract Hotel, which stands high, overlooking the great bend of the river, swirling around huge black rocks like half-submerged elephants' backs. The new-comers had rid themselves of the dust of the train, that insidious

silken dust, which, closed windows notwithstanding, had crept in and formed a soft coverlet on every bag and ledge. The tea-tray beside them, with its white cloth and excellent toast and jam, had been served by quiet attentive servants in long white robes with broad red sashes. They were Berberines, and their melting eyes and gentle movements gave them a strong resemblance to antelopes. Peace was around them, but it was marred by Edgar's ceaseless chant. Even Maurice, who had schooled himself to patience because for the moment he was in love with Iona—who was at least five years his senior—could bear it no longer, when, before the sugar had melted in the cups, Pentland said again for the fiftieth time—"I can't understand why there is no message from Durham."

Involuntarily Iona glanced at Maurice appealingly, though she very seldom allowed any such sign of weakness to escape her, and he controlled himself and answered in a way he considered wise and kind and patient, as though he were speaking to a fractious and rather stupid child.

"If anyone knows Lance Durham, it's I, Mr. Pentland; he is my first cousin, and until recent years I saw a good deal of him, though he's a bit my senior. Now, you can stake your life on this—if Durham said he'd be here and make plans for you, and send you on ahead to those ruins you're so keen on, it will all be arranged and planned and done—first-class. I was expecting him here too. In fact, I came out on a wire from him, and I don't even yet know why he wants me, but *I'm* not worrying; we shall hear from him all right; he's probably got held up somewhere for the time."

Edgar Pentland got up and twitched his shoulders in a way which so irresistibly suggested "insuffer-

able cub " to his wife that she felt almost as if he had said the words, and hoped Maurice did not read them so plainly as she did. Then he turned, and addressing her said, exactly as if Temple had never spoken at all, " 'Ona, why do you suppose Durham isn't here ? "

She suppressed the curve of merriment that rose to her lips, and, sympathising with him a little in the matter of Maurice's lecture, broke out suddenly, " Oh, my dear, don't worry ! I can't tell any more than you why he isn't here ; but it's all so beautiful, enjoy it, Edgar, and if there's still no sign of Major Durham after dinner, well, we must take steps to find out what has happened to him." She looked at him with such a tender light in her eyes that her face, which was attractive but not beautiful, became its best. Edgar softened immediately and smiled back at her amiably.

" Come and tell me about Assuan," she went on, following up her advantage. " How long has it been Egyptian ? And what is there to see here ? We shan't want to talk guide-book when Major Durham comes."

Her husband accepted the suggestion and seated himself beside her, looking at her in a way which Maurice found almost more intolerable than his peevishness. In three more minutes he was transformed anew. His small eyes, generally almost non-existent, shone out in his leathery face like vivid jewels of deep sapphire, the nervous movements of his lean hands ceased, he showed a row of even white teeth, and, getting absorbed in his subject, he spoke clearly and concisely, with a marvellous accuracy as to dates and names.

Maurice lit a cigarette, and, leaning on the rail, listened ; he began to understand some things which

had puzzled him; even so must Edgar Pentland have looked when he courted his wife.

Then a brightly painted launch came spinning round the bend of the river below, and emitted a shrill whistle, which brought hotel servants running down the slope to the landing-place. There was an arrival of some importance clearly; and even before the party on the verandah heard the hotel manager's hasty explanation that here was Bimbashi Durham, they had guessed it must be he.

Major Durham came up the slope without any particular haste, stopping to give an order to one and another on the way. He was a well-built alert man, rather above middle height, with wide-open grey eyes of an unusually penetrating quality looking out of a brick-red face.

"Pentland, I am sorry not to have been here to welcome you," he said evenly, and bowed slightly at the introduction to Mrs. Pentland, before clasping his cousin's hand in silence. Evidently a man of few words.

Mrs. Pentland left the three men at table after dinner, telling them to join her on the verandah presently for coffee.

As she passed between the many well-filled tables a high-pitched voice, which she recognised as that of a woman who had been with her on Cook's steamer up to Luxor, fell on her ear. The voice stated shamelessly: "Is young Langton going to be the Sirdar's A.D.C.? It was his mother who told me. Of course she told me not to say a word."

Iona turned a little in her direction involuntarily, to find young Temple at her heels, and the glint in his eyes told her that this odd boy, who never missed a point, had enjoyed the remark too. Maurice had the appearance of being unusually

young for his years, his face was outlined in soft curves, there were no angles anywhere about him, and yet he was old in some kinds of human lore.

"It's that Mrs. Gentle, the 'boat-bore,'" he murmured, as they two passed out of the wide arch. "That German Thies was at her table too."

"German? You forget! He indignantly denied it, said he was a Hanoverian, or was it a Bavarian?" Iona corrected, smiling. "How he amused us! There is nothing he can't do according to his own account. You remember his water-colours? I wonder if they *were* his. He told us he was going to have them reproduced in England, as they did three-colour printing better there than in Germany."

"He *does* play the fiddle rather decently," Maurice admitted—"no deception there. Then he showed us those swanking photos of himself doing sort of trick-circus business on a horse; faked, I thought they were, especially taken in connection with the story of that Arab horse that someone sold for a song to anyone who could mount it, and he got it because he tamed it like a lamb. I can hear him now. 'I own it took me three-quarters of an hour to mount him, but when I once did get on his back, well, believe me, it grew rather inconvenient; I could never go into a café afterwards but what that horse would follow me in!' Ha, ha! However, he *can* ride; we were forced to admit that when he swanked after us on a fiery steed up the Valley of the Kings, making the stones fly while we plodded along on the humble ass. But the thing I liked best of all was when he said he had been in every country of the world and spoke every known language. 'Thies, Germany, that is sufficient address,' he said modestly, and I suggested

'Thies, the world' would be an improvement. He never seemed to think I was laughing at him; wonder if he knew? Oh, lord, yes, and his 'can never go back to China, killed my man in China,' and his confidential 'Bit of a devil of a fellow I am!' I love him better than a box of monkeys!"

"He really must be clever, though," said Iona, "because he has considerable knowledge of antiquities——" She broke off, hearing someone hurrying after her, and turned to confront Mrs. Gentle, who had followed them out.

"Inexcusable to make a third," the 'boat-bore' said, laughing as if she had made a particularly witty remark. Maurice, who could not abide her, swung on his heel, exclaiming readily, "That is easily remedied," and left them alone.

"All the better," said Mrs. Gentle, subduing her didactic voice. "I want to have a word alone with you, Mrs. Pentland, on behalf of myself and my husband. That is the great Major Durham who is dining with you, is it not?"

"I don't know about 'great.' My husband met him at home, and as he is in the Sudan Civil Service he offered to show us round if we came out."

"Oh, but he is great; you don't know what people think of him here—the coming man, so strong, so stern and so sure of himself. I know he does not hold a very high official position yet, because he is comparatively young, but it is well known the Governor of Halfa, under whom he is for the moment, takes his cue from him, and those in very high places rely on his judgment——"

"You know much more about him than I do, evidently," said Iona lightly.

"One can't help knowing, even though he's only thirty-four already he's a power in the land."

Any phrase she had heard frequently seemed to Mrs. Gentle a nice safe flat paving-stone on which she could land. "Only, as is often the way with these strong men, he's just a little high-handed. He takes up a line and can't see others' point of view. He may be quite wrong, but will admit no evidence against his pet scheme. What do you think he has set his heart on carrying through now? It really is too absurd when one considers it, especially when one has associated with an intelligent reliable man like Herr Thies so much lately. He wants to debar all but British subjects from visiting the antiquities south of Assuan without a special permit. Of course, one has already to have the ticket to visit the temples in Egypt, but that is given to anyone on payment; this would make it much more difficult for foreigners in the Sudan, where the most interesting and less-known ruins lie. It sounds quite absurd, but it's true. This is specially directed against the Germans, Herr Thies tells me, not the French—there might be some reason in that, but the Germans, who are the most eminent scholars the world knows! It's pure jealousy, worked up by a lot of our own savants who are afraid of being beaten on their own ground. At least I should say so, but Herr Thies says not; he says at the bottom of it Major Durham seems to have some idea that these learned Germans really come to spy and to work up the tribes in the desert. I don't believe that can be true. What harm could they do? And to think of innocent simple brilliant Herr Thies intriguing with natives! It's enough to make a cat laugh. Well, Major Durham is the moving spirit in getting an—ordinance—I think they call it, passed, to the effect of debarring the other countries from sending

their savants here to study, except with special permits."

"But if Major Durham has seriously taken it up, he must have some reason," Iona argued. "He is here on the spot, has been many years in the country, he must know better than chance visitors——"

"Yes, that seems so, but as a matter of fact a clever man often does get a maggot in his brain. Major Durham has been out here so long he has probably got narrow, and takes small views, becomes suspicious perhaps where no fear is. It's all so undignified, Mrs. Pentland, can't you see, it will make us the laughing-stock of other nations? Even Herr Thies says that, though he feels very hurt about it, naturally, he is so sensitive; we could hardly persuade him to come on with us, though the Ordinance is not yet passed. He considers it a slight on his country as well as on himself personally. So when I saw you with Major Durham I thought I would ask you if you have any influence——"

"Not a particle," gasped Iona. "I'm sure he thinks us frightful bores——"

"That he could never do," said the wily Mrs. Gentle, who believed in flattery and boasted she "could read Mrs. Pentland like an open book."

"Even take it we had," said Iona finally. "And supposing I agreed with you, which I don't, because I know nothing about it, even then, though I have only known Major Durham an hour or two, I can see that what anyone might say would have very little effect on any line he chose to take."

At that moment she saw Durham coming out of the hotel doorway, silhouetted against the light within. Seen thus he appeared much larger and

more strongly made than she had fancied; he was as tall as her long thin husband, and much more robust. Thies was standing close to the entrance and the light fell right upon him. Contrary to the usually accepted idea of Germans, this man was slight and active and very fair. In outline and colouring he was not altogether unlike Maurice Temple. When he saw Durham emerge he bowed with great deference, drawing his heels together in military fashion. Durham's acknowledgment was so slight that it might have been missed altogether had it not been keenly looked for.

Mrs. Gentle was watching the little scene too, and exclaimed with the air of one playing a trump card. "Besides, he isn't a real German at all; he's quite annoyed if anyone calls him a German—he says he's a Bavarian."

Unfortunately she had a slight difficulty with her v's, and the word enunciated by her sounded the reverse of a compliment!

CHAPTER II

DURHAM SPEAKS

"BEFORE you open your mouth to say a single word, Dollops," said Maurice an hour or two later, "I'd better explain you needn't use any of your high-quality tact in trying to break it gently. I know it's going to be disagreeable and I'm braced ready."

He balanced himself sideways on the verandah railing and looked quizzically at his cousin's impassive face. By common consent these two had avoided explanation as to the reason for Temple's sudden journey until they were undisturbed. Now the Pentlands had gone to bed, the crowd on the verandah had thinned, and except for one or two silent men smoking in corners they were alone.

It had never occurred to Durham to consider whether his news would be pleasant or unpleasant; in his steady grave way he approached such matters as facts, not feelings. So he stuffed his pipe in silence for about two minutes before he said bluntly, "I don't know whether you'll like it or not, but the fact is I have reason to believe you have a brother living."

Maurice gave a groan. "As bad as that? Where is he? How do you know?"

"Through a Secret Service man, a friend of mine, who prowls around among the natives a good deal. No need to mention names; I call him the Hawk."

"The natives!"

"Yes, if it's true, this fellow is living with a subtribe of the Bisharein in the desert."

"A savage!" Maurice exclaimed bitterly. "Worse and worse! How did he get there? When was he born?"

"Soon after the great disaster, I believe. Eighteen years ago. Your father was massacred almost at once; your mother's body was not found until some months later, but there was nothing then to show when or how she had died."

Slowly an awful fear crept upon Maurice, making his tongue move with difficulty. "You don't mean to say," he began with a great effort, then swallowed—"not *half* a savage?"

Durham looked straight at him in his quiet unemotional way. "No, he's your full brother."

Maurice beat the smooth white rail with his hands impotently. "I loathe all mention of that awful catastrophe," he exclaimed peevishly. "I wish I had never heard of it. I was only six when it happened, and in England. I asked no questions then, and would not have done so later, but well-meaning busybodies——"

"Of whom I was one."

"——forced the revolting details on to me."

Durham said no more.

"If you had been in my place I suppose you would never have rested until you knew everything?" the boy asked.

"Certainly."

"To me it is a hideous nightmare. It can't do them any good for me to be made miserable thinking of it all. God rest their souls! Now, as it was just beginning to be comfortably buried in my mind, you go and dig out a kid——"

"He must be eighteen, only six years your junior," said the literal-minded Durham.

"I'm only eight years your junior," said Maurice petulantly, "yet you've always bossed me." He threw out his long thin hands with a gesture resembling that of a Burmese dancing-girl; certainly the contrast between him and his cousin, the sons of two sisters, could hardly have been more striking; the elder was of an uncommon impassiveness, with a promise of unusual potential power, the younger, externally with an air of being highly polished, seemed built on wires.

Silence reigned awhile and then Maurice demanded scornfully, "I suppose what you expect is that I should go and hunt IT up in the wilderness?"

"I will come with you."

"I don't want to go. What's the use? If he's lived all his life with these Bisharein, whoever or whatever they may be, he'll be an oily smelly savage like them—or is it a kind of animal?"

The older man got up and looked down at the swirling lights in the water where it caught the flares from some native craft. From the Bazaar side came a waft mingled of camel essence, moist native and dust, the peculiarly odorous strong-smelling dust of Egypt. Suddenly the long-drawn scream of a native dog or a jackal pierced the air, quivering with a suggestion of extremest agony, and was greeted with a salvo of yells from the rest of the curs. Durham waited until the din relapsed somewhat and then spoke decisively. "I've thought it out," he said; "we can't let it alone. If you won't come I'll have to see it through, but it's your job primarily."

Maurice was about to break out into a diatribe

against busy-bodies who would meddle with things much better let alone, when he happened to glance at the strong red face beside him, and his volatile tongue was stayed. Impertinence shrivelled before Durham. There was something indomitable in those large eyes that killed pettiness. The heavy lids fell half across them, but instead of conveying sleepiness, this peculiarity seemed to add to the power of that unblinking gaze. It was noticeable that Major Durham always looked at a man full face when he did so at all—he had no sidelong glances; as a society woman once said of him, "He looks straight at you in order to avoid seeing you, because he focuses somewhere in the neighbourhood of your spine."

Maurice felt checked, and argued with himself against the ridiculous feeling of being a small boy rebuked; he told himself that it was only a trick in the setting of the eyes that gave that uncanny mastery of glance, and meant nothing at all, any more than the sidelong tilt of a coquette's eyes indicated a really roguish spirit. His mind went off at a tangent. "If one were really clever one could do it with a box of paints," he thought.

Durham, quite unconscious of all this analysis, was working out his own ideas. "After all, some of what you've got belongs to him," he said presently.

"Be hanged to him!" exclaimed Maurice indignantly. "I suppose it does. Mother would have made provision for him if she'd known. The place and all the money there was to leave belonged to her—father had only his professional income. As a matter of fact, now I think of it I believe there is some clause about 'other issue.'" Then a gleeful notion struck him. "By Jove, Dollops, you're

putting a spoke in your own wheel with your craze for hunting out things best left alone, for if I die unmarried all the property goes to you, but a brother of mine would take precedence."

"That makes it my concern," said the big man briskly. "If you don't take it up, I must."

"Say, where does this interloper have his summer residence?"

"I'll try to explain. Further up the river from here, the next place is Wady Halfa; that's my station, it's in the Sudan, and here we're in Egypt. Above Halfa the river begins to take a great scoop westward, and from Halfa itself the railway that was made in such a hurry in 1897, runs straight as the string of a bow across this big curve to a place called Abu Hamed, and so on to Khartoum by the river-side. On each side of this railway where it cuts the desert is country even yet very little known. The old trade road ran parallel to the course of the present railway a little to the east—this is almost disused now—between it and the Red Sea is a vast tract of country in some parts quite hilly, inhabited only by wandering tribes except in the wadys or valleys where there are wells and a certain amount of moisture all the year round, where some of the tribes make their headquarters. The people who live around there are mostly Bisharein, and north of them are the Ababde, but both lots are divided into numerous sub-tribes, and are constantly moving; the difficulty is to get hold of the exact set of people who have the youngster with them."

"Any danger in it?"

"Plenty. Not so much from the tribes, for the Bisharein are fairly amiable in themselves, and most of them have had the fear of authority

impressed on them, but from want of water, losing one's way or getting a puncture in a water-skin. Even those who belong to the country come to grief sometimes; only the other day a whole posse of native police were lost, and not found until they were all dead from thirst."

"Sounds cheery; I'm beginning to like it," said Maurice. "A brush with the Arabs would be jolly good fun."

"They're not true Arab," said Durham precisely. "But it's good enough to go on with. Even in these comparatively settled days we may have trouble; with wanderers like that you never know what you may strike."

"After all, we may never find the beggar—I'm an optimist. Let's go right off."

"Unfortunately the authorities have landed the Pentlands on to me and I'll have to see them through first."

"They'll come too," suggested Maurice with greatly enhanced cheerfulness.

Durham smiled grimly.

"Of course, you're not much of a woman's man, Dollops, never were, but Mrs. Pentland's just A 1; she's game for anything. If we could only scrap the old chap somehow!"

"He doesn't look old."

"No more he is, you literal beggar. I don't suppose he's touched forty, but he was born old. Why she married him beats me, though I thought I got a glimpse to-day."

"A woman must marry someone, and one man's pretty much the same as another to most of them."

Maurice chuckled with delight. "You'll get it bad one of these days," he prophesied, "and may I be there to see! Best be like me and have it

often and easy. Anyway, how long will you have to tote them around before you can get off ?"

"Pentland's by way of being an archæologist, and he's got a strong pull through his brother at home who is in the Cabinet. I'll have to take him where he wants, before getting my leave so as to be free to go with you."

"I'm burning to start."

"We can leave here to-morrow, if the Pentlands are ready, and go on up to Halfa. That part of the way is done by government steamer—there is no railway."

"What do you suppose the eighteen-year-old will look like ?" Maurice queried. "Imagine me a savage."

"Not so difficult to imagine as you suppose," retorted Durham grimly.

CHAPTER III

THE HAWK

It is true there is no railway between Assuan and Halfa, yet the next day when the party got under way they went first to the station to join the train at the same hour they had left it the afternoon before. But their journey was very short, being only a lift over the First Cataract up to Shellal, whence everyone must continue by steamer. They arrived there as the sun was just setting over the great lake formed by the big dam, changing it into liquid fire in a frame of blue-black hills. They were tumbled out on to a sandy bank into a scene of indescribable tumult, to which the tumult at Assuan station was comparative peace. Hordes of natives, of various shades from cinnamon to "nigger brown," jabbered, gesticulated and shouted as they seized bags, bales, baths, helmet-cases, gun-cases, basins, deck-chairs and all the various household necessaries which dwellers in outlying lands invariably carry about with them.

The great steamer, with its tiers of shaded decks, rose monstrously by the wharf. On its topmost deck, devoted to the first-class passengers, stood Iona Pentland looking down with an intensity of interest on the turbaned crowd. Men staggered across the gangways, lost under immense loads, such as packing-cases containing pianos and chests

of drawers, and in the midst of the babel a native sailor in a white jumper, gaining a few inches of clear space, began unconcernedly to say his evening prayers, salaaming, swinging himself to his feet and prostrating himself again and again, forehead to earth as if he were alone in some solemn temple.

As the light fell from the sky the brightly burning fires under the rocks beyond the beach sprang into prominence, and sprinkled their flashes on the weird garments and dark faces of the little groups around them. Flares from the steamer fizzled and cast odd gleams on baskets of green limes and oranges, carried about for sale, and on the pushing scurrying kaleidoscopic crowd; they intensified all outlines and heightened all contrasts. One man, immediately beneath the steamer's side, had his arms so full of flat mud-coloured loaves of bread, that he had even been forced to thrust some of them well up under his arm-pits, and as he stood there crying his wares, there came forth a lean black hairy arm from the lowest deck, to snatch one of the loaves and prod and pinch and finger it, until it seemed likely it would be restored to its original dough, but before that phase had been reached, the bargain was concluded and the vendor satisfied by a few millièmes.

"That is probably the cook buying bread for us to eat at dinner-time," said Durham's voice in quiet enjoyment out of the dark on the top deck. Iona started a little; she had not known he was beside her.

"One of the joys of travel," she remarked composedly.

"Zog it off!" said the irrepressible Maurice on her other side.

Iona was glad he was there; she had never met

a man more difficult to talk to than Major Durham. In fact, she had never found any difficulty before. He made her feel self-conscious, for he never helped out the conversation by any small "ums" and "ahs" of approval or dissent. She had frequently to look at him in order to discover if he had heard what she said, and the feeling of insecurity checked a natural flow. He turned away as Maurice spoke, and was caught by a young officer who had just come on board in the highest spirits and began to describe his "luck at last," by which he meant being ordered to some unpronounceable place right up against the Belgian Frontier, in the heart of the continent. It would take him two months to get there from Khartoum, he said, where he was to lay in what stores he wanted, but he hadn't a ghost of a notion what to take, and could the Bimbashi help him? "I've started with two dozen tooth-brushes, anyway," he declared boyishly.

"No need for that," said Durham. "Use a twig frayed out as the natives do—answers admirably."

So they passed out of earshot.

"What do you make of my cousin?" Maurice asked Iona curiously.

"Nothing so far," said Iona frankly. "I am up against a blank wall. But you ought to know; tell me what is inside."

"To tell the plain truth, I don't know myself," Maurice answered. "Sometimes I think there is nothing, he is just invincibly dull, ponderously matter-of-fact, hideously reliable and safe, and incapable of giving any surprises. Perhaps he may therefore be shallow, just a piece of glass over black paper, giving an impression of profound depth to a casual gazer."

"I feel like that too, but then I've only known him hours."

"I've always longed to stick a pin into him," Maurice admitted, "very hard and very suddenly. Would he let off like blazes or would he never feel it? I don't know, because I've never dared to try."

The Gentles and Herr Thies had stopped at Assuan, and were not going farther south, and when Iona came out of her cabin on to the deck next day, she discovered she was the only lady among about thirty men. These were Sudan officials or soldiers, and when she saw Durham among them she quickly observed that his air of reticence was not peculiar—it was only that he had in the nth degree a quality or habit common to all this able hard-bitten crew. They were men accustomed to responsibility, and even in the youngest the boyish vigour was tempered by a certain hardness and obvious inability to slop over, which made Maurice seem like an exotic plant among them.

All that day and the next night the steamer quivered with the force of the stern-paddle-wheels driving forward her huge flat-bottomed structure against the current, and ever she was followed by the towed flat, like an ungainly duck after a magnet, packed with native passengers continually eating or sleeping.

It was a day of extreme peace; even Edgar ceased from troubling, being absorbed in some books on the Sudan he had brought with him. The scenery changed continually, and was rarely alike on both sides. From the East a piled-up conglomeration of desolate stones and forbidding cliffs frowned upon the warmer tinted West, with its great sweeps of cinnamon-coloured sand, the snow-drifts of the

desert, amid which were set, irregularly, masses of blunt plum-coloured rock like giant puddings. Once, in the midst of the desolation, sharply outlined against the blaze of the afternoon light, stood a tiny black figure like an insect—a woman alone, no home, no sign of cultivation, no symptom of life within reach ; she formed a perfect picture of utter solitude.

It was just after this that Iona found herself alone with Durham in a corner of the deck, where she could speak without being overheard. She had no desire whatever to " influence " him in the way pointed out by Mrs. Gentle, but her interest had been aroused and she wondered if he would tell her anything about his ideas in regard to alien nationalities. So she began rather timidly. " I hear that you are trying to get a law passed to exclude strangers from the country without a special permit, Major Durham ? "

Her tone implied a question, but he was so long in answering that she felt a qualm of fear lest he was going to snub her temerity by ignoring it. It was after a considerable interval that he vouchsafed the one word " yes."

It was not much encouragement, but some imp prompted her to go on. " What harm do you think they can do ? "

Again there was the same interval, and in spite of her first experience, Iona again felt that terrible doubt as to whether she was going to be answered at all, but at last he said something in which the words " infinite mischief " were chiefly audible.

" But if that is so, why do the Government need so much urging ? Why do they not instantly pass a law on the subject ? "

Again two words only were vouchsafed—"Inevitable obstructionist."

She began to laugh. "It's so concentrated," she explained. "It takes some digesting. Yet it makes me see pictures; are they true ones? I see far away out over that range of sand, among little straw-coloured huts, a man going about among the Arabs disseminating discontent, even perhaps distributing fire-arms and telling the ignorant people that a great day is coming when a nation greater than the British will rise against them and do battle with them to free the poor down-trodden people of this country, and that when it arrives they must rush madly into the nearest settlement or town and kill all the white men. Is that what you call 'infinite mischief'?"

He was smiling, looking straight at her. "Wonderful imagination," was all he said.

She knew he was teasing now.

"Well, we haven't analysed the 'inevitable obstructionist' yet," she went on. "What about him? I picture a kind of Board meeting, and most of the men, except the very stupid ones, are uneasily conscious that germs of mischief are being sown broadcast, and the very stupid ones laugh at them, but the Obstructionist, who is an able man, does not laugh; he argues seriously and shows them how utterly absurd their fears are, and he does it so well that the uneasy ones feel they have been fools. It needs some abler man to stand up to him, not once but again and again and again, to refute his specious reasoning, and show those poor sillies that their uneasiness is the only true thing about them. If he does this he will carry them over once again to his side, but he must hammer at it, because if he leaves off for too long, they'll lap up

the soothing syrup again; they don't like being uneasy, it's uncomfortable, and entails taking unpleasant steps."

Durham laughed aloud. It was the first time she had heard him do so, and she had quite a ridiculous sense of achievement.

But all he said was, with a gleam of real mischief in his eye, "Woman's intuition."

By the evening of the second day, as the sun fell low over the hills, Abu Simbel came in sight, and the steamer tacked across, guided by the careful Reis, to tether under the bank for the night, but the tethering took some time, and before the plank was laid across to the greasy mud-bank, darkness had swooped down upon the Three Colossal figures, beside their headless brother, who sit for ever and stare into the East for the coming sunrise.

It was tantalising to have got just a glimpse of them, to have seen their outlines grow stronger, and then to have them filched away! No one could see them in the darkness, yet the whole party set out across the half mile of broken ground to the temple which they guarded. There was only a darkling red flush left in the sky, and two sailors, holding candles in glass shades, went as guides to point out pitfalls. Into the cavern of the temple, pierced into the solid rock, they all penetrated, finding it thick with the heated air of the past day. The candles made grotesque shadows dance on the walls and pillars and brought out strange splashes of red colour like blood on the stones. They showed up all the lesser figures of ancient Egyptians deeply scored on the walls, but they could not show those vast figures outside, for they were far too grand to be reached by the light of puny candle flames.

Edgar, who had been reading up the subject all day, was bursting with information about these weird interior figures, which seemed to move with spasmodic life as the candles swung round. Greatly to the disgust of the authorised Egyptian guardian, he set up an opposition party, with his own version of the history of the temple, and Iona felt bound to follow him closely, and supply the part of chorus. But that odd intuition, which arose from intense sympathy with her fellow-beings, told her that something more exciting and mysterious was afoot, and again and again she glanced toward the dark doorway, wondering what business it was that kept Maurice and his silent cousin outside.

Maurice as usual had been following close at her heels, but just as he reached the black gap of the temple door, Durham had laid a hand on his arm and drawn him aside a hundred yards away, where a cascade of sand fell like a glacier between the mighty rock of Abu Simbel and another. There was an eerie feeling in the blackness with the sand slippery beneath the feet and the little cold wind of evening wafting like a spirit touch on the cheek. A feeling that he was near something or someone, who was profoundly mingled with his fate, held Maurice rigid in Durham's reassuring grip. Neither spoke for some moments, and though the darkness had fallen so that it was impossible to discern objects unless very near, Maurice felt quite certain that they were not alone. As his pupils dilated he made out the figure of a tall native, in some light-coloured flowing garment, a few yards in front, and almost as he discerned it, Durham said quietly, "This is the Hawk who brought me word about your

brother. Ask him anything you like, he speaks English."

"Yes, indeed, I speak English," said the stranger in a peculiarly pleasant tone, with a slight accent, as if his tongue clung to the words lovingly and did not easily relinquish them.

"How did you find out about my brother?" Maurice asked, his heart throbbing with indescribable excitement.

"I have heard for some time that a sub-tribe of the Bisharein had a white person living with them," the man replied, "and I thought it might be only an albino, for that sometimes happens. The facts ever evaded me; even as I seemed to come upon the trail it vanished, and I was then on other business and could not stop to find out. Only lately is it that it was told to me. This is the baby of that white officer's wife, who was carried away in the raid on Halfa nearly twenty years ago. But never yet have I set eyes on the youth. I have been all things to the Bedouin, and at last I was a merchant from Jedda come to buy camels, from which journey I have just returned, and this time have heard more."

He stopped and Durham spoke. "You have something fresh to tell us, Hawk?"

"It is indeed so," assented the man, and the attractive note in his voice stirred Maurice with a curious sense of pleasure. "I have news for you, Bimbashi, for the youth is no youth, but a girl!"

The unexpectedness of it struck his hearers dumb for the moment; even Maurice the Ready was tongue-tied. A sister! A sister who had lived with the Bedouin! What could she be like?

"You have seen her?" he burst out at last.

"Not yet. I have hopes, but we must go warily, or they will carry her off somewhere far from us."

Durham gave a low laugh. "It turns out after all that my rôle is to be that of a woman-hunter," he said. "What was that you were saying about me, you young scamp?"

Somehow the presence of the man whom he called "Hawk" seemed to have exercised a warm penetrating effect on him; never had Maurice heard him speak so genially, and well did he understand it! There was something about this stranger that drew the heart strangely, and he felt an intolerable desire to see his face. As Durham began to draw away Maurice broke back from him. "Can't I see you in the light?" he cried eagerly, fumbling with a box of matches. "I never wanted to see anyone so much in my life."

He felt the man look to Durham for instruction, and Durham hesitated only a minute. "Yes," he said gravely. "It wouldn't be a bad thing, but be quick or they'll be coming out of the temple."

The match flared up, shielded by Maurice's long thin hand, and the Hawk bent forward smiling into the little circle of light, showing a smooth-skinned full face, rather of the type of a well-to-do Baghdad merchant; only the unusually large straight nose redeemed the face from flabbiness; the eyes were small and round and unprepossessing. Maurice experienced an overwhelming rush of disappointment; not such was the face he had expected to go with that voice which drew his heart-strings. As he flung away the match angrily and turned on his heel rudely, he heard the man chuckle.

CHAPTER IV

A FREE SPIRIT

"I CAN'T see why I mustn't have a stirrup! Why shouldn't a stirrup be fixed on to this stumpy pillar in front of the saddle?" Iona asked next day as she sat on the majestic well-trained camel which had been brought up for her use to the Governor's house at Halfa, where they were staying.

"No reason against it whatever, except the immemorial custom of the East," Durham assured her from his own mount alongside. "Personally I've never wanted one."

They moved slowly off between the bare walls which enclosed the gardens of the European part of the community. They passed a tangle of broken-down mud bricks and palm-trees, which looked like a ruined village, and gradually left all signs of habitation as they walked toward the open desert. Edgar had gone to see some ruins, accompanied by the Governor of Halfa himself; and Maurice was on Iona's other side on a rather less respectable camel. The trio were followed by a guide in Egyptian skirt and European boots, seated on a donkey astride, so that his skirts were drawn up from his hairy legs, from which the boots hung suspended, stirrupless.

No sooner had they left the last hovel behind

than Durham, calling out some Arabic word to his camel, drew up. "I am going to leave you here in Maurice's charge, Mrs. Pentland," he said, "if you will excuse me. I have some arrears to make up. You will be quite safe with the guide." He saluted and Iona felt a little disappointed. In spite of the difficulty she experienced in talking to him, he was an unknown quantity, and as such always interesting, whereas Maurice—she looked at the boy and was puzzled by a change in his face since yesterday. Did she know him quite so completely as she imagined? There was a grim tight-lipped look about Maurice to-day as of one who has strung himself up to do great deeds.

He saw her look and thought she was angry at Durham's desertion, so rushed into the breach with an explanation.

"It isn't the Major's fault, Mrs. Pentland, indeed," he said hastily. "I daresay he could have made arrangements about the work, but I asked him particularly to let us be alone this afternoon, you and me——"

She stared at him frigidly and then began to laugh.

"It's not that," he blundered on. "Not what you think I mean. I never for one moment supposed you'd prefer my company alone to having the Bimbashi; I never thought of you. It was for myself. I wanted you to see me against a blood-red background."

Was the boy suffering from a touch of sun that he babbled thus?

She looked at his smooth pinkish cheeks and silken hair and soft outlines—a "blood-red background"! She began to laugh rather hysterically as her ungainly beast drifted forward, solely

controlled by the camel man who ran behind, for she was as helpless as "baggage."

She saw Maurice's underlip quiver, and his face cloud, and in a moment she was compunctious. "Forgive me, Maurice; if you had only seen yourself when you said it you would have understood. What do you mean? I'm dying to know."

So they bumped forward side by side, and he explained without any delay. "Look at it," he said, sweeping his arm over the pinkish drifts and hollows scattered with stones which they were approaching. "Imagine it eighteen years ago. There was a polo ground somewhere hereabouts, and my father was one of the officers playing. My mother and some of the other ladies were watching. It was supposed to be safe enough, for the place was held in force, and the Dervishes hadn't come so far north as this yet. Then suddenly someone saw a horde of Arabs rising above the ridge, mad as maniacs, flourishing their weapons and screaming, as one sees in the pictures. How they ever were allowed to get so near without warning I don't know. Gross carelessness somewhere. Anyhow, down they came, sweeping right into this helpless crowd. Two of the officers were killed at once, others wounded, my father and mother were carried off."

"And you?" Iona asked breathlessly; she had heard nothing of this before.

He caught at her interest, rejoicing greatly.

"I was a kid of six at home."

"But what happened to your people?"

"My father's body was found by the mounted men sent out very soon. It was cut to pieces; they did not find my mother's for some months, but then it was discovered half-buried in among

some rocks and drifted sand, and they did not know how long she had been dead; they could only identify her by—her boots."

Iona put her hand over her eyes for an instant and then looked out upon the plain which seemed suddenly to have grown black with horror though in the full sunlight.

"I'm sorry," said Maurice penitently. "I feel like that too. It embitters everything; for the last six years or so since I really knew the details I have tried to bury it, but it won't be buried, it comes up like a murdered corpse."

"You wanted me to know because you felt that I did not understand this background in your life?" she asked gently.

"Yes," he answered rather sullenly. "Sometimes you treat me like a pet dog, a little thing that likes jokes and sugar; maybe I am that or would have been——"

"Is it then my fault?" she asked, leaning over to him and putting her shapely brown hand on his arm.

"No," he admitted. "I do play the fool or I did, but it's different now I'm up to the neck in it and I want you to understand."

"In the middle of it! Is it not finished?"

"Is anything ever finished? Always there are consequences," he answered a little sullenly, and she was silent, remembering that Durham had wired for him to come out from England suddenly. It was like Maurice not to be able to leave it at that, as he might well have done, for Iona would never have attempted to force his confidence, but he added unnecessarily, "I promised Durham not to say anything more."

"I shouldn't advise you to break a promise

to Major Durham," said Iona with a strange touch of irony in her voice. "When he looks at me now I always feel rather as if the Judgment Day had come and I must prepare to examine my soul, if I'd ever deceived him about the slightest thing—it's unimaginable," she ended up.

"There you are!" burst out Maurice bitterly. "Durham is the strong man, because he's got that sort of a look about him. He's strongly made with set muscles, and straight level eyes, so he's a strong soul to be depended on and straight as they make them. For all your spirituality you are uncommonly material, you clever people. Because I have a soft skin I must be soft, soft all the way through, and so it goes!"

"Maurice, what *is* the matter with you?" Iona asked, overlooking the rudeness in view of his abnormally excited state.

He threw out his arms with a gesture of hopelessness and they rode home silently.

That evening the Governor of Halfa gave a dinner party in honour of the Pentlands.

The Governor was the sort of man usually described as "genial," because he had a rosy face and an easy manner, and talked and laughed a good deal, and was always ready to make people as comfortable as he liked to be himself. He had another side which was not shown to his social equals. To Durham's advice most of his official success was due. This fact did not make him at all jealous of his junior officer, because he never admitted it to himself. He had an unshakable conviction that he only asked the Major's advice to see what view he took, and when he got it he immediately adopted it as his own opinion with such sincerity that he frequently said ingenuously

what a sound judgment Durham had, as his views almost invariably coincided with his own.

This man, Colonel Fairlie, had taken some trouble to be pleasant to the Pentlands, for besides being a bit of a snob, he had a genuine admiration for brains, and he recognised at once, under his uncouth exterior, that Edgar was really clever in his own line. So it was not only the brother in the Cabinet who was responsible for the Pentlands having a good time at Halfa. This brother had never done anything that anyone could remember, or shown anything but the most mediocre ability in grappling with his brilliant opportunities, but he had managed to establish in the minds of himself and his colleagues the idea that he had an indisputable right to be provided for in some rather handsome way by the nation. During a re-shuffle the harassed Premier would say to himself, "If I give Smith the War Office and send Jones to the Post Office, where can Pentland go?" and the fact that Pentland need not "go" anywhere never occurred to him.

It was a thoroughly agreeable host who took Mrs. Pentland down to dinner that night, and exerted himself to please her. The only other lady present among a host of men was the wife of a medical man, Mrs. Fairlie being at home in England. The Colonel's private secretary, a rather dour young Scot, took the other end of the table. Iona knew at once that Col. Fairlie was thoroughly superficial, but he was very easy to talk to.

It was a brilliant lively gathering. Between the flowers Iona could see Durham's stern unimpressionable face, and Maurice looking unusually white and worn. For a while she could not discover her husband, but when she did so, saw

that he was next to a very sallow dark-faced man in the uniform of a Captain; by the way Edgar munched his lower lip she knew that he was thoroughly displeased about something. She was surprised at this, for while they dressed he had been in the best of good humour, recounting all that he had seen and expatiating on the glories yet to come.

"Who is that man on the left of my husband?" she asked her host in one of the insignificant pauses in the flow of his conversation.

Col. Fairlie looked along the table and smiled. "Before I tell you, make a guess at his nationality," he replied.

Iona studied the keen rather rough and much-lined face of the Captain. It was full of an intense vitality and energy, shown in the deep-set dark eyes and the hawk-like nose. The complexion was hardly darker than that of a sunburned Englishman.

"He is not English," she began cautiously. "But he is in the army, so he can't be Italian——"

Col. Fairlie laughed aloud. "He's an Afghan," he informed her. "Or, to speak more correctly, a Pathan, and the Pathans are not counted among the Afghans proper. You haven't been in India? Well, that fellow's ancestors have lived by killing and raiding and slitting each other's throats from time immemorial. Looks fierce, eh?"

"I don't know exactly about fierce," she hazarded. "But he looks as if nothing in this world or the next would scare him."

"You're right there. These men think nothing of death. It's all in the game. I'd sooner have Dilir Khan behind me in a tight corner than anyone I know."

"Has he been educated in England?"

"No. It's a queer case; he's godson to a very distinguished general, dead now, and the old man gave him the best education India affords, and sent him travelling. He's worth it too, a remarkably keen brain, speaks about ten different languages."

The dark face, not saturnine or grave, but full of the wild joy and vigour of life, fascinated Iona. She resolved she would get to know its owner at the first possible opportunity, and she had not long to wait, for she and Mrs. Davent, the doctor's wife, were left alone only a short time before the men streamed in and Major Durham brought Dilir Khan to her at once, almost as if he had divined her wish.

The lean wiry man bowed low, and then, erect, faced her, the glad light gleaming from his vividly bright dark eyes.

"You won't be required to talk to him in Pushtu," Durham explained to Iona, looking at the Pathan almost affectionately. Captain Dilir Khan talks English as well as you or I, to say nothing of French, Italian, German and a dozen or so of his monstrous hill-dialects."

"English is my second mother tongue," explained Dilir, and at the sound of his pleasant voice, Maurice, who as usual was not far off, turned and looked at him intently.

"What are the other languages besides the European ones?" Iona asked.

He began to enumerate them on his long thin leathery fingers—Chinese, Siamese, Hindustani, Arabic of course, a little Persian, and so on. "I forget really what they are," he said cheerfully. "They live one below the other in strata, never

mixed, and when one is required it shifts to the surface."

"You seem to have found time to enjoy life too, in spite of all that study," said Iona, smiling in response to his infectious vitality.

"It is not study that, I learn by ear wherever I am, always I am learning. In the highlands of Luristan, around the head-waters of the Yang-tse-Kiang, in the Lamassaries of Tibet, in the dens of Stamboul, in the bazaars of Asiatic Russia——"

"I don't suppose your brain is often idle."

"Not often." His words were perfectly pronounced, but there was a soft blurr, a deep-toned hanging on to them before letting them go, that gave a strangely majestic quality to his utterances. Durham had turned away to speak to someone, and suddenly a bewildering gust of longing seemed to sweep Iona off her feet. Never had she realised before as she realised now with a flash of insight how caged and confined her life had been. It seemed as if the breath of life from this free spirit who stood before her had interpreted many things to her. Never yet had she known freedom; she had been schooled daily and hourly to do according to the will of another. She had never been free, yet she had not known it until this minute. Her desire to travel and see foreign countries, what had it been but an unconscious effort to secure a wider space for the flutterings of her wings?

This man seemed to bring with him a gust of strong wind such as roared down the black steeps of his native passes from off the icy peaks and along the gorges and glaciers of the inaccessible fastnesses.

"You are free!" she cried suddenly and

quite involuntarily; she had not had the least intention of saying that.

His dark eyes met hers with an instant gleam of understanding.

"All are free who do not fear death," he exclaimed.

"Ah, no, indeed! For men that may be true, but for women there are worse things than death."

"Yes?" He drawled the word a little, his keen glance never wavering.

"Fear of public opinion, fear of hurting others——"

"If you do not fear death the rest follows," he began.

She grasped the immense gulf that lay between their points of view, and pulled herself up. "There are so many things you can't possibly know," she said rather helplessly, "because you were born a free spirit."

A gay laugh from Maurice broke in on them, and Durham, who came up with him, exclaimed, "Here's a friend who wants to renew his acquaintance."

"Ah—so." Dilir turned with lightning quickness to grasp the boy's hand in his sinewy fingers.

"Whew!" exclaimed Maurice, exaggeratedly wringing his own hand. "For a fat merchant you have uncommon muscles."

Iona saw Durham glance at him; almost it seemed to her as if in warning, and she felt again a touch of the mystery surrounding her. Dilir, however, seemed to feel no necessity for caution. After one swift glance round to see no one else was near, he said calmly, "So you knew me."

"Not I," answered Maurice candidly. "It was the voice. There are not two men in the

world who speak like that. I couldn't believe my eyes, but I couldn't doubt my ears."

"Ah, yes, I did not change my voice that other night, took no trouble; next time it is not only the eyes but the ears that shall deceive you."

"You must take care not to wear that then," said Maurice, pointing to a ring with a huge green shining stone in it on the Pathan's right hand, "for even though my eyes and ears both deceive me, when I feel that grinding my finger-bones again I shall know. You are warned!"

"What is it?" asked Iona. "An emerald? I never saw one so large."

"A green diamond," said Dilir, drawing off the ring and handing it to her.

"He's an expert on precious stones among other things," remarked Durham. Never had Iona known him so communicative, so warm in manner and response; it was clear an uncommon bond existed between these two men so dissimilar superficially.

"I have never before seen a green diamond," she said, handing back the stone. "And how you know it is one puzzles me."

She made an excuse to move and talk to others of the party, feeling that she must not neglect them. She was beginning to be a little uneasy at the absence of Edgar, who, after coming in with the rest from the dining-room, had almost immediately gone out again and not returned. It was not until some time later, when she had had most of the men in the room introduced to her, and talked a little with each, that she saw her husband coming in. Her heart gave a great leap of alarm, because, though no one else would have noticed anything amiss, she, who knew

every line and movement of that angular body, saw at once that he had been drinking more than was good for him. She went over to him and he stood in front of her smiling self-consciously.

"I'm going to bed, Edgar," she said. "See, nearly everyone has left. You come with me, dear. I don't want to be alone for hours in that strange room open right on to the verandah."

The well-intentioned lie came glibly from her tongue from long habit, but her heart was sick within her. Only a year ago had he begun this terrible practice, and then she had learned with horror that he had been addicted to it before she knew him, and had been sent for a long sea voyage to cure it with apparently effective result. During the year that she had known this awful thing she had striven with her whole heart to cure him again, and thought she had succeeded. The medical man had said that to take him away to new and absorbing scenes would be the best possible help he could have, and it was partly on these grounds the Egyptian trip had been arranged.

"I'll come, but first just one cigar with the Colonel," said Edgar, and then added with an odious smile, "Proud of you, 'Ona, centre of attraction to-night."

She broke away. "That is hardly wonderful when there are no competitors," she said hurriedly. Then turned to say good night to her host, who was approaching.

An hour later she was still up, waiting for that shuffling foot which at last came along the wooden corridor and paused at her door. The moment Edgar entered she saw he had been repeating his experiments in the last hour. His face was purple and his mood entirely changed—defiant, brutal.

"Edgar, you promised me——" she began, standing before him in her pretty blue wrapper, hair-brush in hand.

"You blame me! You dare!" he cried loudly. "It's *you*, you! You talk the whole evening to a d——d dirty native and expect me to watch!"

She stared, round-eyed.

"A dirty black native I tell you, that Afghan chap, not fit t'black your boots, you—fair woman——" He was shouting.

She sprang at him and, seizing him by the shoulders, thrust him back in a sitting posture on the bed and shook her hair-brush at him. "Don't you dare to speak; don't you open your mouth again," she cried, trembling from head to foot. Her onslaught was so unexpected and so entirely unlike her that for the moment Edgar was confounded. Then she went on swiftly in an undertone. "Edgar, are you mad? In a wooden house like this everyone can hear every word. Captain Dilir Khan's room may be next door."

As a matter of fact it was!

CHAPTER V

BY THE BITTER WELLS

In the East the sky seemed to belly out like a diaphanous veil of pink flushed upon primose, a sail of faint exquisitely shining tints. In the West the stars were fading. There was a strange cold smell of dust in the air and a sense of immensity that involuntarily made one creep nearer to one's neighbour. In the immediate foreground the rigid line of the Wady Halfa—Abu Hamed railway ran straight as a ruler north and south. One of the camels was still groaning and gurgling hideously, while its pack was being adjusted; the others, already laden with the baggage of the party, stood ready to start.

The scene was Station No. 6 on the line, and the Pentlands were there too, as well as Durham and his cousin Maurice, who had studied camel management during his week's stay in Halfa. He watched the riding camels being brought forward and made to squat down with the air of an expert. He was exceedingly proud of the fact that he could make his own beast understand what was required of it without the aid of a camel man. Edgar Pentland and Iona stood by the shed, which did duty for a station, drinking cups of steaming coffee with no milk in it. They had refused the offer of camel milk, and there was no

other available. Durham was checking the baggage list with the chief guide, and a motley array of camel men and hangers on, a quite ridiculous number, waited the word to go forward and begin the day's march by joining the half-dozen men of the camel corps who were waiting for them out in the open. The four Europeans had come up in the train, leaving Halfa the previous day, and had, by special permission, slept in two compartments shunted into a siding for the purpose. Greatly against Durham's will had the Pentlands been included in this enterprise. Had the matter rested with him he would have made short work of them, sending them on to Khartoum without delay. He had, in fact, made all arrangements to that effect, taking infinite trouble in thinking out details for their comfort and wiring many times on their behalf. Mr. Pentland had from the first been set on seeing Meröe, and this was not difficult to achieve, as they could stay in Khartoum some days first before going on, and certainly Meröe, with its weird pyramids and innumerable remains, ought to glut the soul of the most omnivorous antiquary.

Unfortunately, after all this had been settled Edgar Pentland had heard of some strange rock paintings in the group of hills around the Wells of Murrat, in the Atbai desert, and he immediately changed his mind, saying Meröe could wait, already so many antiquaries had been there the freshness had gone from it, he would discover some new thing of his own. The more the Governor and Durham threw doubt on the story of the paintings, which had never before been heard of, the more determined did Edgar become to see them for himself.

"There are some rock paintings on the other side of the railway near the river certainly," Col. Fairlie admitted. "And there are some wells called Murrat, which means 'bitter,' there too. I expect this fellow who told you the story made a mistake and mixed up the places."

The guide, who had interpreted for the Arab who had brought the news, was sent for, the Arab himself having disappeared. He was very positive he had made no mistake. "I ask him, gentleman sir," he said to Edgar, "if he not knowing about them other too very known paintings by the Nile side, he saying yes, gentleman sir, he know um awfullee well, but these bigger and better and just now found, if the gentlemans go there he find some man there who will show all the paintings for a leetle money, but only a very leetle."

"You should have kept the fellow, Ibrahim," said Col. Fairlie, "and brought him up to me so that I could investigate."

"So I would have done, your Excellency, if I had had the able to, but he come and he go like a pouf, and he not seeming to care awfullee much about them paintings whether the gentleman go or not going."

"Are the Wells of Murrat very far out the way we are going?" Maurice asked Durham, with a vague idea that he might after all have the society of the charming Mrs. Pentland for the first part of the way.

"Two days' journey," said Durham curtly, his face very black.

Yet he had to give in, for his chief came to him in dire perplexity. "It's bad luck," he said. "But short of absolutely ordering that obstinate chap to stop going and having a hell of a row over

it, I'm afraid we shall have to let him have his way. After all, they can't come to any harm in that direction with a good guide." The influence of the brother in the Cabinet was very potent even in the Sudan.

" I'm starting in that direction myself," Durham admitted at last.

The Colonel's face cleared. " Tootle them out along with you and drop them," he suggested. " I've carefully refrained from asking what particular wild-goose chase it is you are going on, now you've got your leave, because I don't want to know. If, metaphorically, you want to spend your leisure bus-driving, it's nothing to me, but a little episode like this can't delay you much, and with a good man, say Hassan Beg, to bring them back to the railway they'll be all right."

So it had happened.

It was not Durham's way to lament over the unavoidable; he accepted it philosophically, but if he had been in his chief's place the Pentlands would never have gone to Murrat. " No actual danger, but quite too much risk for a peaceable couple of tourists like that," he told Maurice, who felt his hair lift a little in anticipation.

To Iona the plan brought delight unfeigned. She had struggled nobly to avoid even recognising to herself how her heart had gone down at the thought of leaving the good friends they had made and starting off alone again with only Edgar for a companion. Now this expedition entranced her, two days out into the real desert, with the pleasant companionship of Maurice and the great sense of security given by Major Durham's presence! It would be a golden experience, one to be treasured all the rest of her life; nothing

should mar it, not even the fact that she could take very few clothes and wear only a unbecoming topi, while most probably, do what she would to save it, her nose would peel. To avoid this terrible catastrophe, so far as possible, she carried with her in her immediately get-at-able saddle-bag, a large pot of face cream, and sundry other trifles for saving and freshening her personal appearance. Her joy was not spoilt by Edgar, because, since that one outbreak, he had behaved very well indeed. It is true that Captain Dilir Khan had vanished when they came down the next morning, so that irritant was removed, but another would speedily have been found to replace it, if Edgar had been so inclined. On the contrary, he had seemed thoroughly ashamed of himself, and limited himself strictly to one whisky-and-soda at dinner-time.

Thus it was they prepared to make their start before the sun grew strong. They took matters very easily that first day, and to the novices' unconcealed astonishment rode through a fairly wide valley clothed with acacia scrub and a certain amount of bush vegetation.

"I pictured the desert an endless expanse of sand, flat as your hand," said Iona to Durham as they rested in the valley during the heat of the day.

"You're not alone in that. A lot of it is sand, and some gravel, and there are quite steep hills and rocks where we're going. Murrat is a gloomy place."

"You don't believe in the existence of these paintings?"

"No, but it's an experience for you to go, and your husband would think to his dying day he'd been done out of the chance of his life if he didn't

see for himself they aren't there," he answered, smiling. It was the first time he had ever referred directly to Edgar in speaking to her.

Edgar himself approached; he had overheard the subject of the conversation. "I am perfectly convinced the paintings are there," he said, twisting about, "and I shall not leave until I have seen them——"

A new uneasiness crept into Durham's mind. The water at Murrat was bitter and bad for Europeans; supposing this pig-headed fool insisted on staying when he got there, and held up the whole party in these unpleasant circumstances? However, no good manufacturing trouble which might not arise.

They were sitting in the shadow of a great boulder, and close by Durham's hand as it lay idly beside him there peeped up a grotesque and hideous mask. Iona thought for the moment it was a scorpion or some venomous animal and hardly dared breathe, but he, without speaking, put his large hand over it and lifted it into the lap of her blue linen dress.

"A chameleon," he said. "Quite harmless; there's a treat for it."

The beast lay perfectly rigid and still, and slowly a greenish blue pervaded his skin.

"Best he can do," said Maurice, laughing. "Doesn't often have to tune himself up to that pitch."

Though the wells are only eleven and a half hours' camel-riding from No. 6 Station, it was late on in the afternoon of the second day when they reached Murrat, as they had taken matters very easily. For long before they halted they had passed through rough and broken rocks growing

more and more precipitous and difficult. At last the men led the camels and watched where each put his feet, so that progress was very slow in climbing up the black defiles. Iona was tasting sensations such as she had never known before. The huge black rocks standing up against the fiery sky, the glowing contrasts, the sense of adventure and of something awesome and unknown ahead had thrilled her through and through. So far she had always been considered a rather unusually good-tempered sympathetic capable woman of a domestic type but not very original, and now she became aware of great spaces in her nature which had never been filled.

The actual wells were in an extinct crater, from which rose on all sides frowning cliffs 330 feet high, crowned in three places by forts put up at the time of the Sudanese fighting but now unoccupied. The crater was covered with drifting sand mingled with signs of many visits from men and animals. Durham explained that they would not camp here, where it was about a quarter of a mile wide, but in a more snug recess, which the guide knew, where the ground was not so contaminated as in the actual vicinity of the wells; so after they had gazed around, they dismounted and the camels were led off. When first they got down to the ground both the Pentlands were very stiff, the unaccustomed motion of the camels, even though they had come only at a walk, had racked every bone, but Maurice, being supple, seemed to feel it very little. They all scrambled up another defile into a delightful little clear space of sand, in the midst of which a camp fire was lit.

The animals were secured in a similar spot not far off and fed, and watered from the wells. A

little of this water was brought by the smiling Hassan Beg for the visitors to taste, but they only sipped it and made wry faces, finding it intolerably bitter. Luckily they had brought plenty with them from which the coffee could be made. Never had any food tasted so excellent as that eaten in the clear cold air of the evening after a day of exertion. It was mostly out of tins, but from the ox-tail soup onward was warmly appreciated.

"I never did really believe it would be so cold in spite of all you said," Iona explained as she crouched beneath a rug Durham had thrown over her after dinner. She lay drinking in great draughts of the beauty and strangeness of it all. The sharp black peaks rose up against a clear sky still lighted sufficiently by a fairly new moon to show them off. Lower down where the firelight flickered on their sides they shone as if polished. This peculiarity caught Edgar's attention, and cigar in hand he wandered round the little circle examining them attentively.

"Found the paintings already?" Maurice asked chaffingly. Edgar hated any kind of chaff, but he was in such high good humour to-night that he only grinned without any sign of irritation.

In such surroundings when Durham presently began to tell them of the fighting in the Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century and the part played by the tribes of the desert the effect was greatly heightened.

"The Ababde tribes who lie about here and northward," he said, "did good service then. Of course, like all these peoples, they are inclined to take what advantage they can from either side, but they had the sense to see which would

prove stronger in the end and came in with us. They did fine work at this very place. In 1893 one of their chiefs, Saleh Bey, was killed here defending the wells against the Dervishes."

"What about the Bisharein?" Maurice asked eagerly.

"Much the same. Being farther south they came more in contact with disaffection and tampered more with the other side, but they are all 'friendlies.'"

"But if there are no Dervishes anywhere near here, and these tribes as you say are friendlies and under government, why do you put sentries?" Maurice asked pointedly.

"One never knows. The camels might be stolen. After all, though as you say, these tribes are under government, they can't be called civilised; they have their gusts of passion and sudden upsets. They are like uncontrolled children, and could easily be influenced to do hideous things by any strong man. Luckily for them at present they are held by our strong hand and are not likely to give trouble."

The two little sleeping tents had been pitched and the sleeping bags laid ready; very soon most of the party felt irresistibly drawn to them.

Durham went off to see to the men and camels, and to the sentries in the rocks around, men from the escort which was to go back with the Pentlands. The camels were munching comfortably from the fodder placed on mats before them, and many of the camel men were already asleep, rolled up completely in their voluminous brown cloaks beside their own beasts. The acrid smell of camel and overheated humanity vexed Maurice's sensitive nose, and he soon returned to his cleaner

quarters. Twice during the night he aroused himself sufficiently to realise that his companion had gone the round of the sentries and returned. All night long the fire burned, made up on a sound basis of camel-droppings with twigs and thorny scrub frequently renewed on the top.

The bitter water served for washing purposes, and some of it was brought up in a Willesden canvas bucket next morning. Iona had her own bucket and retired into a cleft of the rocks with it, returning as fresh as a daisy. Breakfast was just ready.

"It's odd we haven't seen a single native yet," Maurice remarked.

"It *is* odd," assented Durham. "I fully expected to come across some in that wady where we camped at midday. They had been there lately and here too. It's rare not to find some of them at the wells. Well, Hassan Beg?" to the guide who stood salaaming. Hassan Beg answered in Arabic.

"He says there are some Bisharein down by the wells now; would you like to see them?" Durham asked Iona.

Not much need to ask; they were all keen to make the acquaintance of these lords of the desert on whose territory they were trespassing. Maurice especially felt a curious longing to meet them. He had seen degenerate town dwellers in and about Halfa, among which were a few Bisharein, though they had mostly been Nubians, thick-lipped and repulsively dark.

Almost miraculously quickly two strange wild-looking creatures stood framed in the narrow entrance to the sandy camp. One was a tall strikingly handsome man with straight well-cut features and his hair cropped palm-tree fashion, standing up in a shock on the top of his head and

falling away in a lump each side. His eyes were bright and intelligent, and he smiled, showing his fine teeth. The other man was much smaller, with less distinguished features and a round face; his hair was closely cropped all round. Both were dressed in a twisted mass of yellowish cloth like unbleached calico, thrown over their shoulders and falling round their lower limbs.

Durham spoke to them in a mixture of Arabic and Bisharein and gave them some tobacco.

"Ask them if they know of these paintings?" Edgar Pentland suggested.

"Yes, I'm going to, but it may be hard to make them understand what it is we're after," replied Durham. It evidently was, for the conversation lasted quite a long time, and had to be helped out by Hassan Beg. At last, however, with signs and short cries, the men began pointing to the wells.

"They say there is one of them down there who has been here constantly, and if anyone knows he will; they have not heard of them themselves," Durham translated.

Back came the men presently, thrusting forward another a little shorter in stature, but so like the tall man they might have been brothers. With a great deal of nodding and pointing he contrived to make them understand that he had seen such paintings high up in the rocks to the south.

"I told you so," said Edgar with a smile of triumph. It had never even occurred to him at any time in his life to forego the offensive sentence when it had seemed to be suitable.

He wanted to start off at once, alone with the natives, and only Durham's absolute prohibition

prevented him; with manifest impatience he waited until the whole unwieldy camp was set in motion.

"We shall have to see them through this," Durham said aside to Maurice. "I can't leave the lady until they are safely started on the homeward way."

"Doubt if we'll get the ass away from them under two days once he's there," said Maurice, but he was not averse from lingering in Mrs. Pentland's society a little longer.

Only the last arrival and the crop-haired man were coming as guides; the tall Bishary bowed gracefully, and murmured "backsheesh" with extended hand, and having been suitably rewarded he withdrew to his fellows round the wells.

They had not started very long before the crop-haired man, engaging Hassan Beg in conversation, suggested, that as the way was rough and narrow, it would be better for the baggage camels to go down to the plain below and wait. Durham thought a moment. So far as he and the rest were concerned they were safer if any treachery were intended without the baggage camels, which could only cause confusion in a moment of stress, but he had no notion of sending them unescorted to the plain to be swooped up by any stray rogues. He finally put them in charge of four of the armed escort of sturdy Sudanese, taking the other two on with him. He and Pentland and Temple were all armed, and good shots; that made five armed men; no handful of nomads would attack such a party. So he gave the order.

The narrow winding way grew steeper and steeper, pitching up and down continually, but at length came out into a straight gully between

two cliffs. It was getting uncomfortably hot, and Iona was not sorry when Durham called a halt besides the tomb of a "holy man," as the guide explained. The two Bisharein prostrated themselves in reverence, while the Europeans examined with interest the rough stone tomb covered with palm-leaf mats and bestrewn with various offerings, such as a jar, a few beads and some coloured rags.

When they mounted again the cliffs grew steeper, and Durham, who was following the two Bisharein closely, revolver ready, asked, not for the first time, if the place was much further, and was assured it was just there. In fact, he could see a curious kind of natural door, such as is not uncommon in these formations, with a huge slab dropped across from cliff to cliff as lintel. It gave on to a great amphitheatre of rock, which looked, from the glimpse that could be had of it, a natural enough place for such artistic efforts, usually associated with the burial of the dead in wild places.

As he drew near the lintel he stooped his head to pass it, and then pulled up his camel sharply, so that it completely blocked the gateway with its huge form, on which, Iona's camel, following very closely, nearly bucked into it, but just saved itself, a feat repeated all down the line to the two Sudanese at the end.

In a second Durham had extricated himself from the gate and swung round on his saddle, finding it impossible to turn the animal in that narrow space. Iona saw him, revolver in hand, with such a stern set face that it terrified her. Yet in the midst of it all he caught her frightened glance and found time to reassure her with a

sudden smile, so unlooked for that it set her heart, which had seemed to stand still with terror, beating again.

Then she followed his glance upward, and saw above, to right and left, the cliffs fringed with dark menacing faces and gleaming spear-heads, and even muzzles of guns and rifles, which bristled along the serrated edge.

Maurice, who was next to her in the line, had turned perfectly white, blue-white, as if every ounce of blood in his fresh young body had been changed to gall. His lips were set in a thin blue line, and when he met Iona's eyes he tried to smile, but the result was so ghastly that she involuntarily glanced away. From his childhood the word "Dervish" had been to him the bugbear of life, taking the place of ogres and what-not as nursery fears, and now that a dread array of beings irresistibly suggesting them appeared without a moment's warning, uncontrollable terror seized him, swaying him profoundly. He felt furiously that in another moment he should be violently sick, and cursing in his heart he fought for self-mastery Except for the slight movement Iona had made in turning, there had been a long minute of utter stillness. The two Sudanese, who at the first sign of danger, had unslung their rifles, awaited orders. Then Durham moved a little, and revealed to Iona's astonished eyes the fact that the natural gate beyond him opened on to sheer space! If the camel had passed through, it would have gone down with a frightful crash into unknown abysses. The light-footed native decoys had passed through on foot, and sprung instantly to right and left, along a narrow terrace of inches only, and had hidden like conies in the crevices. There could

be no mistake as to what their intention had been, but it had miscarried.

Durham composedly and collectedly was asking for the sheikh, and presently in response to his request the head of a man exactly similar to that of the tall man who had visited them in their camp this morning appeared above the cliff.

In answer to a sharp question as to what was the meaning of this, and why the white people, friends of the Bisharein, had been led into this danger, he replied slowly that before he could parley all weapons must be given up.

Durham had known that this would be the demand and that he would have to yield. This was no party of innocent nomads, but a fighting *ghrazzu* out for blood. There were at least a hundred men visible, and they held the white people at their mercy. In any case resistance was useless, because of the woman in the midst, but such a demand must be resisted so far as possible, and a long argument ensued, Durham repeating that as friends they had come into the country on a perfectly innocent ride, that they had no intention of evil toward the Bisharein, that he himself was a member of the Government, and that the Bisharein well knew what would be the ultimate result of such conduct on their part, even if they seemed to be the stronger party for the moment. Had it ever been known that such an outrage had been overlooked? At this moment Mr. Pentland, whose camel was next to the Sudanese in the rear, made a frantic attempt to get past them backwards, and in an instant a dozen muzzles were levelled at him, and the sheikh proclaimed that if the weapons were not instantly given up the tribesmen would fire a volley.

Durham at once threw his revolver on the ground, and commanded the others to do the same. He was exceedingly puzzled at the turn of affairs, so entirely unexpected, and in fact unknown in all the years he had been in the Sudan, in exactly this form. These men could not be out for plunder merely; to attack a party such as his, with himself, an official, as leader, as they well knew, would be far too serious a risk to run for anything they might gain.

Some of the Bisharein scrambled down into the gully like cats, collected the weapons and went back.

The sun beat down intolerably in that confined space, and perspiration began to stream down the faces of the white people. Iona was thankful to see that Edgar looked much the same as usual and certainly betrayed no cowardly fear. They were allowed at last to back out slowly until they reached a wider space among the rocks, where their camels knelt while they dismounted, and were then led away.

"Sit down, Mrs. Pentland," said Durham, selecting the most shaded spot against the rock. "They dare not hurt us; probably think they will hold us to ransom or some such silly game." He knew himself this was highly improbable, but it was the most reassuring thing he could think of at the moment.

The sheikh presently came and squatted down a few yards off, and then they saw he was actually the same man who had come to their camp that morning. Durham repeated his arguments at greater length, and the chief listened and apparently assented; he assented, indeed, to everything that was said, for when Durham asked him why he had

led them into a trap when he knew there were no paintings on the rocks, he waved backwards with his hand toward the amphitheatre, muttering as if to make believe the paintings were really there!

At last the conversation died down from sheer inability on Durham's part to think of anything fresh to say, and the Arab rose and departed. He sent back one of his men with a waterskin from one of the camels and the saddle-bags containing food. Maurice, who, after much wrestling in agony, had regained his normal self, brightened a little. "They're not going to starve as, anyway," he said, handing up potted meat and biscuits. "What is their game?"

The fold between Durham's brows was very deep indeed; he was speculating on the fate of the baggage camels and their wretched owners, and the rest of the Sudanese. He had heard no shots to give him information on that point.

CHAPTER VI

EDGAR THE EGREGIOUS

"THESE men belong to the Koatil, one of the smaller tribes of the Bisharein," Durham explained to the others. "This man who has talked with us is only a petty sheikh; the real chief is a fellow called Ali Jalan; he at least knows enough to think twice before meddling with Englishmen. I have asked to be taken to him, and they tell me we are going there."

They were riding on their camels at a foot's pace on the evening of the second day after their capture. They had left behind the volcanic rocks around Murrat, and passed almost due eastward over an orange-coloured sandy plain, from which curious three-cornered rocks, looking at a distance precisely like stone-built pyramids, upreared themselves.

No glimpse had they had of their servants or baggage, and the two Sudanese and Hassan Beg had also disappeared with the rest. It was this that made Durham most uneasy; the responsibility for the fate of his followers hung heavily on him. The best they could hope for was to be carried off as slaves to some of the tribes.

The saddle-bags of the white people, which they had been carrying at the moment of capture, had been respected, and as it happened there were

things in these which proved of great comfort. The armed guard had considerably diminished; Durham, who had been puzzled at first to account for the fact that the Koatil could raise so large a body of spearmen, concluded that some at least had been " hired supers " from other tribes. Their escort was now about forty armed men, half of whom were mounted. The captives had been allowed to ride on their own camels, a great concession, as these were well-broken riding animals, and the difference between them and some of the untrained mounts of the tribesmen was enormous. No violence or roughness of any sort had been offered to the prisoners, who were allowed to ride together and talk freely.

When they had encamped the first night they were still in sight of the black rocks of Murrat, and they crouched down beside some splintery bits of out-cropping granite. The sand was hard, but they had been supplied with some of the rough dark camel's-hair cloaks worn by the men themselves, and in spite of their evil odour they were thankful enough to have them. There was no means of making a fire, and no possibility therefore of making coffee, so they ate the remains of what had been intended for lunch, and drank some fetid luke-warm water from the bottom of the skins. No one had uttered a word of complaint, not even Edgar, the spring of whose grumbling had seemed to dry up at a touch of real hardship. With it had dried up something else; he had become a wooden image, uninterested as never before, an automaton, not a man, who hardly seemed to hear when the others addressed him.

They had crouched together beneath the rocks for warmth and safety, and very early next morn-

ing had been awakened to go on. By the time the sun grew strong they had reached a wady or dried-up watercourse with some acacia trees and scrub, and here they halted awhile. The Bisharein brought up a mat basket with some handfuls of maize in it and set it down beside them. Durham took some in his palm and held it out to Iona, who had no idea it represented food, and looked at it much as a cat might look at an apple, with entire unconcern.

"Indian corn?" she said, smiling. "Do they feed the camels on it?"

"They feed themselves on it," Durham answered, indicating one of the slender finely made nomads solemnly munching near them.

"Like that? Raw? How can they digest it?"

"We shall have to learn, I'm afraid; it seems to be all they've got; but if we are here an hour or two, we can make some coffee, we've still some left."

A wave of incredible brightness ran over the wan dishevelled faces at the notion of coffee.

The low sammerah bushes were quickly cut down, and though the natives looked a little askance at this proceeding, for they say "they are the bread of the camels," no one actually interfered, and as all the three men carried matches, the fire was soon alight. The little tin kettle they had for boiling all drinking water was used, and with the aid of one of Iona's clean handkerchiefs, to strain the coffee, they were soon drinking blissfully out of their own enamel mugs. Maurice hit on the brilliant idea of soaking some maize in his coffee, but did not find it much improved.

So they journeyed on. The camels went at a

slow walk, averaging about two and a half miles an hour most of the time. But even this was a trial to joints unused to the motion. Iona naturally suffered most, for Durham had done a good deal of camel riding, Maurice was supple, and Edgar, in spite of some assumed delicacy, was really leathery, and could go from morning to night shooting over his own Yorkshire moors without feeling any discomfort.

At last as evening drew on and the waxing moon cast long wavering shadows ahead, Iona began to feel she was losing consciousness, wandering on in an interminable dream. First her thoughts were vague and then became tiny clear-cut pictures like those seen before sleep finally settles down on the brain. She saw a thread-like amber stream dropping down a heathery hill-side, and she knelt and pushed aside the dripping ferns to dip her hand in the little sandy pool, then came back to reality with a start, having nearly fallen forward from her mount. Once again she wandered off, and this time her mind fixed on that strangely comforting smile which had overspread Durham's face at the moment of awful peril. She saw him as he sat on his mount in the gap before the precipice smiling to reassure her. It was not the kind of thing she had expected from him—it showed imagination. Once again she was falling off into space when Maurice's voice pulled her back.

"Not so far now," he said; "there are signs we are approaching a big camp."

Iona answered irrelevantly. "I could not have believed Major Durham could have smiled like that." The others were out of earshot.

Maurice needed no explanation. "Just what would get a woman," he said enviously. "But

Lance wouldn't know anything about that; must have been purely instinctive. Bless me if I don't begin to think the old chap is a lady-killer right down at heart."

"Then after a pause he asked, "What did I look like? Pretty ghastly, eh?"

"I understood, Maurice."

"Jolly clever of you! It wasn't the spirit that was afraid, I can assure you. Purely physical phenomenon on the part of the brain, which belongs to the body."

Another silence while the spongy feet of the camels padded along.

"Has Major Durham arrived at any solution of the problem?" Iona asked.

"He's badly bunkered. No object in the thing at all. Couldn't hold us to ransom, or a flying force would be sent out to rescue us at once. You see, the awkward part is that he and I made arrangements to be absent for three weeks at least, possibly more; no one was to worry about us——"

"I see. But about us—if we don't come back to-day, or was it yesterday or the day before? I've lost all count of time, then the railway people will communicate with some authority?"

"I don't want to give the show away, but I can't see any use in treating you as an infant because you're a woman," began Maurice. "Why shouldn't you know what we all know?"

"Why not?" said Iona, but her heart sank a little; she was so tired that she would even have been thankful for a little soothing syrup.

"Well, Lance thinks that this is being manœuvred by someone who knows the ropes; for some reason that he can only guess at; and if so that 'god in the car' wouldn't let himself be done by

a trifle like that. Easiest thing in the world to send a wire from some desert station up north there, in Lance's name, saying you had decided to go on with us."

"You mean—someone like Herr Thies?"

"Hit it in one. Jolly cute of you. It sounds ludicrous these days, sort of Middle Ages and so on, but it's the only possible solution."

"Does Major Durham think that?"

"He won't own it yet, his imagination has never had to stretch so far, but it may get more elastic as days go on. Personally, I'm perfectly certain that it's the work of that confounded little braggart. In that case, it's a grim look-out for Lance."

A sudden shoot of terror pierced Iona so that she clutched at her saddle-pin. "You think——" she stammered and could say no more.

"Yes, it's Lance they're out after," said Maurice grimly. "It's pretty clear. That native telling about the paintings was only a fake to get the lot of us to Murrat; the man pulling the strings knew well enough that we should go with you, and a party with a lady in it was easier to manipulate than two men alone who might never have gone to Murrat at all, but right out into the desert, and would at least have put up a fight for it. Those Bisharein beggars had been carefully coached, pretending not to know about the paintings at first, then fetching a man who did. There's one thing certain, if Lance had gone headlong down that abyss we should never have seen those armed johnnies at all, but we and our camels and our men would have been allowed to go peacefully home to tell the tale. There might have been red rage on the part of the Government, but who

was to find the men who did it? And it might have looked like an accident too."

"I see." There was something to be thankful for then, better they were captives and all together, even if going to an unknown fate, than that they had left their strongest and noblest companion a mangled heap of bones at the foot of a precipice.

It was nine o'clock at night before they reached the hills they had seen at midday, not very high hills either. As they approached, the ground got more stony and uneven, the camels were foot-weary and stumbled, and were led at last through a defile where signs of vegetation appeared; higher and higher they went gradually, until, turning a corner, they looked down upon a wide valley, which seemed filled with twinkling fires and thickly clothed with bushes and trees. The place gave a deceptive appearance of homeliness, as if each fire indicated a house and hearthstone. It was evident at least there was a large population, for the inhabitants, warned by their scouts, rushed up to see the strangers, and stood thickly around as they stiffly dismounted. Iona found to her dismay she was too stiff to move at all. Some of the dark men with shining eyes stretched out lean arms to help her, but Durham, thrusting them aside with the air of a master rather than a captive, himself lifted her from the saddle, and she clung tottering to him, unable to stand.

They were escorted to a fire on the hillside, and some mats were flung down by it for them to sit on. Durham placed her there, and, turning to the leader, demanded food and drink quite courteously, but firmly. The man assured him that both would be forthcoming, but Maurice did not wait. "Let us make coffee, anyway," he said.

"There is still some left." And in a very short time he had procured some doubtful water, set it boiling and made the coffee.

It was life-giving.

There was even sugar in it. They handled their large enamel cups lovingly, warming their cold fingers on them, for the nights were very chill, and then they crouched on the mats by the crackling fire, beyond which a steady never-wavering ring of dark faces watched their every movement. Presently a woman wearing silver earrings and a dirty garment across her head, appeared, carrying a wooden bowl of some sort of porridge, which she set down with a grunt.

"It's all right," said Durham, examining it. "Wholesome stuff enough. I've sampled it many times on trek. Made of the meal of the maize." He took Iona's empty cup and scooped some up for her in it and handed it to her.

"There are two tea-spoons," said Maurice. "Frowsty lot we were not to bring one apiece! Here you are, Mrs. Pentland; Lance and I will manage with forks."

Hungry as they were, the porridge seemed quite good, and after the first few mouthfuls they ate it without comment. At any rate, it was filling and sufficiently nourishing. When they had finished, the same petty leader who had brought them, pointed to two roughly made booths on the slope of the hill and signified that they might use them. The booths looked as if they would fall to pieces any moment. They were made of mats closely woven from palm-leaves and supported on a rickety framework of boughs. They were of no particular shape, and at the highest not more than five feet.

The unwontedly silent Edgar crawled into one instantly, and Iona prepared to follow him. Durham laid his hand on her arm and showed her a flask. "This is full of brandy," he said; "at any moment you want it ask me, if you feel chilled or ill.—Will you take it now?"

"No, thanks, keep it; I will ask you," she said gratefully, then held out her hand. He said nothing, but took it reassuringly in his warm big grasp, and looked full at her, as though to tell her not to be afraid, and she felt comforted.

She patted Maurice's shoulder as he lay outstretched on the mat, and he caught her hand and kissed it suddenly.

So like Maurice!

Then she crawled into the dark tent. It smelt fusty and was bitterly cold.

"Aren't there any cloaks or wraps?" she asked in dismay.

"Take my coat," offered Edgar nobly, stripping himself, and shivering rather exaggeratedly as he did so.

"No, no, of course I can't. Besides, you have a weak chest and I am quite strong."

It was a tradition that Edgar had a weak chest, though secretly Iona believed his occasional hoarseness to be due rather to the over-smoking of cigars.

He insisted so obstinately on her having the coat, that at last she lay still, knowing that she had only to wait until he was asleep or supposed to be, when she could safely return it without robbing him of his halo of self-sacrifice.

Then she heard Durham's low voice from the tent near.

"Mrs. Pentland?"

"Yes?"

"Are you warm enough?"

"We shall do all right," she replied as brightly as she could. In her heart there was one point of pain which had quivered there ever since Maurice had said to-day, "in that case it's a grim look-out for Lance." She was afraid for him, afraid of his masterful ways with the natives. If she had said she was cold, as likely as not he would have started out and shouted for some of the tribe to bring her wraps; there might have been a scene, better no risks.

Her reassurance evidently satisfied him, for he spoke no more to her, though she could hear him and Maurice talking in low voices while she lay shivering and wondering when she could safely restore the coat to its owner, while "saving his face." One sentence of Durham's she did hear clearly, and it mingled long after with her dreams.

"Our only chance lies with Hawk of the Desert!"

There flitted before her tired eyes the dark, thin, lined face of Captain Dilir Khan. By what subtle intuition or brain-wave did she connect him with this odd title? She could not imagine, but she knew as well as if Durham had told her that this was the man he meant.

Then with a jerk she sat up and stealthily returned the coat to her husband.

CHAPTER VII

EYES THAT SEE

THEY had been there for a week now, a week that seemed like a year, and there was no indication yet either what the Koatil wanted them for, or what they meant to do with them.

Durham had explained to the others exactly where they were; it was in the Wady Terfaui, the headquarters of this particular tribe, and one of the most fertile of the valleys in this great Atbai desert, where there was, except at the very driest season of the year, always a certain amount of grazing for the herds and water for the men. Day by day Durham had requested to see the head sheikh, Ali Jalan, and had been put off with specious promises. At last, in answer to his unwearied persistence, he had been told the sheikh was not here yet, but coming any day, and, whether this was true or not, he was forced to be satisfied with it.

"Never heard the Chief talk so much in my life before," said Maurice, giving his cousin a name which had easily arisen out of the circumstances.

So far as living went, the captives had not much to complain of, since their captors gave them the best they had themselves. After the first night, rough camel's-hair cloaks had been

supplied, and the captives, after shaking them well and hanging them out all day in the sun, had been only too glad to use them. The thing they missed most was water for washing purposes, for there was none. A certain sort of soft sand, which collected in the crevices of the rocks, was all they had as a substitute to rub themselves down with, and this process left them prickly all over. Yet all except Edgar presented a fairly creditable appearance. The men had had pocket razors with them and a bit of soap, and Maurice and Durham managed to spare enough of the precious drinking water wherewith to shave. Maurice's great concern was with his little safety blade, and he fondled it and sharpened it and played with it continually, in an agony lest it should fail him. Edgar had refused to take any trouble at all; in spite of his wife's coaxing entreaties, he grew a bristly beard and looked a hooligan. She was desperately ashamed of him. Hang-dog, sullen and silent, he glowered at them when they adjured him to brace up. He did not grumble, took in silence the share of food allotted to him, but that seemed to exhaust all his reservoir of self-command; more and more he slipped into the background, a moody objectionable object.

Iona had naturally taken immense pains to keep herself neat and dainty. She was lucky in having certain toilet articles with her, including brush and comb. She kept her hair in good order; she damped and pressed out her blue skirt and coat, and washed her few handkerchiefs, and remained always a pleasant and refreshing personality.

The wady was a large one, the sides rose to a

considerable height, and were clothed with the rather scrubby vegetation of the desert. Durham knew the names and uses of most of the trees and bushes, and beguiled the time by pointing them out. Some of the acacia trees, *sunt* he called them, rose to twenty-five or thirty feet in height, but their feathery leaves gave little real shade. He repeated the Arab proverb, "Confide in him as you would in the shade of an acacia," when warning one against a perfidious comrade. There was a thick upstanding bush called thundub, fifteen feet or so in height, and there were hegleck trees with stems twelve or fifteen inches in diameter. The few dom palms were carefully preserved, because from their leaves the mats are made, but bushes there were everywhere in abundance, from the senna, a shrub from which the well-known medicine is made, to the prickly sammerah on which the camels feed. It seemed miraculous that they could get any nourishment from the scanty dry leaves. There were besides some refreshingly green bushes called merkh, which were kept for the sheep and goats, though the sheep were not in the least like the European variety, and could hardly be distinguished among the goats. Little beaten paths wandered up and down and in and out of the bushes on the hill-sides, and everywhere in any open space was a shapeless tumble-down palm-leaf hut or tent.

The people themselves seemed very much alive, agile and bright-eyed; the men were usually of a fair size and the women noticeably smaller. They were obviously far the inferior half of the race, "hewers of wood and drawers of water," yet they were not confined to the huts, and except for the pretence of a piece of black cloth thrown

half across the head when not inconvenient, they were unveiled. They went about freely, ceaselessly busy. Grinding meal, sometimes maize, but often the rougher dhurra, also coffee-berries, weaving endless miles of palm-leaf mats, or doing agricultural work. But the last could only be inferred because it was all carried on at the low or far end of the wady, which took a turn about half-way down, beyond which not one of the captives had so far been allowed to pass. So they only saw the women going and returning, carrying rude agricultural implements or sheaves of dhurra-stalks, or earthen-ware jars of water on their heads, from the wells which were also at that end.

The women were at first much shyer than the men, and had a trick of vanishing when directly addressed, but when Iona persuaded her own party to let her go alone among them, they became more friendly, realising that she was a woman like themselves. She learnt a few words of their tongue, and watched them weaving, and even tried to take a hand herself, to their great delight. She noted how they rubbed out the coarse meal flat on the stones, mixing it in the process with an incredible amount of dust and dirt, and thus produced the greyish sodden cakes that were so repulsive to the taste. She quickly improved on that, mixing the meal herself on a carefully scoured stone, and baking the thin flat cakes by the fire until they were fully cooked and not half sodden. The food of the imprisoned party varied little, porridge or cooked beans formed the staple, and when all their own coffee was gone they now and then had a handful of coffee beans given to them to be ground and used. A bowl of camel's

milk was a rare treat. The first time this had been presented to them Iona had taken a great draught, innocently expecting it to be like cow's milk, and then puckered her upper lip. "It's just like milk a mouse has been drowned in," she announced.

"Hurry up with the bowl then," Maurice jeered, "so that I may know for next time what milk a mouse has been drowned in tastes like."

"But of course *I* didn't know until afterwards," Iona explained lamely and joined in the laugh that followed. But it was not long before they all looked forward to a drink of camel's milk as the greatest luxury, especially if it was fresh.

It had been a great surprise to both Iona and Maurice that dates were not forthcoming. "I thought that all these desert johnnies simply lived on dates," Maurice said, "and I had a sort of feeling about coconuts too, but of course that's wrong altogether—coconuts belong to the desert-island stunt."

One evening they were sitting as usual over their fire, the men enjoying the one smoke they permitted themselves during the day, with the idea of husbanding their tobacco, when an unwonted commotion at the low end of the camp attracted their attention. There was a beating of small drums, a twanging of weedy string instruments, and a good deal of hoarse intermittent shouting.

Durham sprang to his feet and looked at Maurice, who immediately responded, but though they were not tied or confined in any way, it was obvious they were carefully watched, for two of the tribesmen, who had been sitting on the hill above, at once rose and disappeared, and long before the two Englishmen had reached the forbidden corner,

they met an array of threatening spear points and were shepherded back again.

Returning baffled, they flung themselves down on their mats in silence.

"Wonder how it will affect us?" said Maurice. He was soon to know.

The next morning Iona was awakened by unusual sounds outside the tents, and directly she heard Durham's voice speaking in Bisharein she crawled out. The sky was faintly blue with the coming dawn and the valley was still swathed in wisps of mist.

Durham was standing, tall and unmoved, among a cluster of spearmen, evidently picked fellows, for they were all as tall as the petty sheikh; it was quite obvious they were ordering him to do something which he resisted. His jaw was set grimly. Maurice crept up beside Iona. "They have told him he must come before the sheikh," he whispered. "But he says the sheikh must jolly well come to him." As he spoke Durham once more signified quite unmistakably his intention of not being hustled, and sitting down casually on a large stone proceeded to fill his pipe to show his indifference. He had over-rated the personal power of the European when far from supports. There was a sharp word of command from somewhere in the background, and the dangerous crowd of fierce men swept in upon him, obliterating him from view. Iona clutched Maurice's arm and turned quite white; without knowing what she did she pressed her face into the boy's coat-sleeve, grasping at him instinctively for help. He slipped his arm affectionately over her shoulder. "Cheer up," he said rather grimly between his teeth. "The Chief's as right as rain; they haven't hurt him."

She peered again fearfully and saw Durham, upright now, in the centre of the waving spears. He stood bare-headed, and they could not see if he were wounded or not, but he had evidently given in to superior force, for he walked away with his escort. When he had got a few yards off, he turned his head and called out, "Not hurt at all, forced to go. Stay where you are."

In spite of this Maurice sprang after him. "If they're going to do him in, I'll be there too," he cried, but his face looked blue and his teeth chattered. Iona clung to him, and hand in hand, like two children, they went after the rabble who followed the armed men, agape with curiosity. No one took any notice of them or stopped to turn them back. The nucleus of the throng went down into the valley, passed a little way along the bottom, and then began to mount the other side. Here there stood an unusually large sunt tree in a dusty open space.

Durham was by this time lost to sight in the crowd, but after a few minutes, when the people surged this way and that in their endeavour to see what was going on, he came into view again, standing back against the tree, calm and dignified. Some of the spearmen made a rush at the women and children, scattering them like chickens, and Maurice and Iona saw everything.

The Chief had been tied to the tree by his hands being drawn back on either side and fastened behind the trunk. A rope had been looped round his legs below the knees, and also drawn taut, so that he stood rather unevenly on the spreading roots. He held his chin high, with the back of his head resting against the trunk, and, except for the lack of his sun-helmet, he was fully dressed.

Having surveyed him with a good deal of chattering, and having several times tested the ropes to see they were secure, the warriors dispersed, all except four, who were posted motionless on guard a few feet away, two on each side. The others saluted ironically, by twirling their spears above their heads, and doing a kind of step dance, and then waltzed away to the lower end of the valley.

Durham surveyed the ragged-looking crowd around, and when he caught sight of his two friends about fifteen yards off there broke over his face that reassuring smile which so illuminated Iona's memory.

"Don't you worry about me," he said, without raising his voice.

Maurice broke out into angry profanity, clenching his fists as if he would set upon the guards bare-handed there and then.

"No manner of use," said Durham evenly. "I could have knocked half-a-dozen down myself possibly, but there could only be one end to that, and when I saw they meant business I let them take me."

"What about the sheikh?" Maurice blurted out.

"Only a pretence. I knew that they never intended I should go to him; it was here they meant to bring me all the time."

"We'll stay here by you all day," said Iona, speaking for the first time and finding it difficult.

"Please don't do that," he pleaded earnestly. "It distresses me, and I'm really all right."

However, like two miserable children they stood there uncertainly until the red flush in the eastern sky, that had flamed through the trees at the

lower end of the wady, vanished, and the long clean rays of the sun pierced like sword-blades up the heart of the valley.

"If you could fetch me my sun-helmet, Maurice," said Durham presently, "I'd be obliged."

The two started simultaneously, and on their way back to the booths argued hotly as to which of them should have the privilege of taking it to him. "They're much more likely to allow *me*," said Iona, "because I'm a woman," and Maurice was reluctantly forced to agree there might be something in it. Her mind had been working on another problem. "He hasn't had any breakfast," she began presently. "And I don't see how we're to feed him with those cold flat cakes and onion, which is all we've got."

"There's just a little of our own coffee left," Maurice admitted, "not enough for all of us, and we kept it, he and I, thinking it might come in usefully for you in time of emergency."

"Splendid! Now you be a dear and make it for him, while I take the helmet, and if I find we're allowed to go up to him we can both carry back the coffee."

To this he agreed.

There was no sign of Edgar when they reached their camp, and Iona dived into her tent to tell him what had happened. A reeking smell of brandy at the entrance almost drove her back, and prepared her for what she should find before she got inside. The light of the triumphant sun beating through the thin mats made a kind of twilight and lit up the huddled form of her prostrate husband, and showed, beside his nerveless hand on the hard-beaten earth, a large empty flask.

As Iona knelt beside him, listening to his ster-

torous breathing, her soul was filled with loathing. With the cunning of the drunkard he had then known all about the brandy flask! He must have seen Durham carried off, and either from craven fear of what was going to happen, had soused himself into unconsciousness, or possibly he had meant to do it some time, and only been restrained by fear of Durham.

A coward! A thief! A drunkard! This was the man she had married, a feeble creature, selfish to the core! There and then every scrap of love she had ever felt for him vanished. It had never been more than maternal at the best, but if he had played the man that would have been sufficient to carry her loyal soul through. She might never have even recognised the lack of genuine quality, and now she knew, knew past all question.

Bending over him she undid the stud of his soft shirt-collar and passed out. The crisis of her life had found her in the few seconds she had knelt in that tent, and as she came out to find Maurice gravely waiting with the helmet, there was a kind of quiet certainty on her face which puzzled him. The boy made one more attempt to come with her, but she forbade him, with a new authority that awed him into acquiescence. She was quite accustomed, she said, to wander about by herself among the women and no one would molest her. So she passed swiftly and lightly down into the valley.

Her heart beat a little as she mounted the other side, not from any fear of what the natives might do to her, but because she had eaten of the Tree of Knowledge and the scales had dropped from her eyes. Twenty minutes ago she had been still in heart Edgar Pentland's wife; if not with any great enthusiasm, still quite willingly and without any

wish to escape. Now that was at an end; never again could she be to Edgar as she had been; he had killed that relationship for ever by his own act, and in so doing had revealed to her her heart.

Durham's straight and unflinching gaze was fixed upon her as she neared the tree, but he did not smile; he was too keenly anxious as to how his guards would treat this brave messenger, and in his heart he cursed Maurice for not coming himself. One of the guards grunted as the Englishwoman's intention of approaching the prisoner became plain, but none of them moved, and she walked fearlessly quite straight up to him, and without hesitation fitted the helmet on to that square head covered by thick brown hair, grown, as its owner would have said, disreputably long.

"The brim at the back will poke your head out a little from the trunk," she said, anxiously regarding her handiwork.

"It doesn't matter, thank you."

The "thank-you" rang joyfully in her heart; at last she had been able to help him.

"A little later I'll fetch you some coffee."

"Don't risk it."

"I shall." She nodded slightly to give her words emphasis and stepped back, smiling at him as he peered out under the brim of the khaki-coloured helmet.

A something, a warmth of expression, changing and moulding those hard features for one instant, and shining out of the eyes, transformed the man. For the first time he had really looked at her with the eyes of his soul. Her heart gave a great leap, and hurriedly she turned away lest he should see the gladness in her face.

By the time she got back to the camp Maurice

had the coffee ready, and carefully carrying the precious thing they set out again together. Alas, as they came within sight of the tree, they saw the tall sheikh, who had been their captor, standing beside the guards. They would have drawn back, but he had seen them, and a grin broke out on his face as he advanced toward Iona with that slow dancing step the other men had used. She dodged to one side, holding the cup, which she had taken from Maurice, but again he came in front of her, so she stopped. His movements were not unfriendly, but there was something in his leering smile that terrified her more than a spear menace.

"Don't try it, Mrs. Pentland," said Durham's voice authoritatively from behind the sheikh. "Give the cup to Maurice."

She obeyed, feeling more ready to throw it in the face of the obstinate savage. He was not diverted by her movement; he left the thwarting of Maurice to the other guards, who taking their cue from him, derisively pointed their spear-heads at him as he advanced. Maurice started as one nearly touched his hand, and some of the coffee leaped over the edge of the cup. Seeing this the rest of the guards advanced, joy on their faces, and jabbed at him from different directions. They did not actually touch him, but the boy, a bundle of nerves, leaped in response to every thrust, spilling the coffee here and there, and so mortified that he was ready to burst into tears.

Durham was so much absorbed in the other danger-point that he hardly gave Maurice a thought. "Go back, Mrs. Pentland—go back at once," he repeated in the most commanding voice he could use. "And don't attempt to bring me anything else to-day. Go back at once." Few people

could disobey Durham when he spoke in that tone. Without even looking at him, Iona sorrowfully obeyed, and directly she turned, the sheikh wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, wheeled round and began to gibe the wretched Maurice, who now, goaded to desperation, seized the almost empty cup and flung it straight at his face. The man dodged, and then, with a yell, charged at the culprit, and Maurice, unable to stand his ground, dashed down the path after Iona, and was not followed.

He was so utterly wretched when he arrived back at his tent that it was all Iona could do to prevent his starting off again to stand beside Durham and defy all comers. "What would become of me?" she asked him. "Edgar is ill in his tent and I have no one to protect me."

After a miserable breakfast, which stuck in their throats, the two climbed to a certain height on their own side of the valley, where they chose a spot from which they could still keep Durham under observation though not obtrusively, and they sat down under the shadow of a great boulder.

"I know that what he hates most in his heart is that I should see him," said Iona. "He would rather I had ignored him altogether, but how can I?"

Maurice had lain down full length, with his head on a corner of her dress. "I shouldn't want you to keep away if I were in his position," he said. "It would comfort me to know you understood."

"You?" she said, without thinking. "Oh, but you are quite different."

This was gall to him. He had wilted already under the knowledge that Iona had seen him

playing like a dancing-bear before the spear-points of the Arabs; it was small consolation that she had not actually seen him run, and into her careless remark he read contempt. But Maurice was changing under the stress of hardship. Instead of bursting out in a torrent of self-exculpation, he lay silently, writhing inwardly, and feeling himself the veriest worm in creation, wholly unworthy even to touch her skirt. He deserved all that he got and more.

Down in the valley now it was like an oven, and even the movement from the huts had ceased. There was a certain amount of scraggy shade over Durham, but the heat made the perspiration run down his face, and he could not wipe it away. There were also the flies of the usual Egyptian variety that "sticketh closer than a brother." They came not in clouds, but one at a time to settle with great deliberation, and remain glued in spite of any shake or jerk; nothing but physical force sufficed to remove them, and however many times they were removed by a desperate twist of the neck, there was always one more who settled again at once and remained as though his feet were loaded with seccotine. Every time Durham made one of these little movements to get rid of an insufferable tormentor a quiver ran through Iona. Her mind was so wholly absorbed with the man under the tree that she had ceased to consider the man at her feet, and it was more an impulse than any desire of comforting him that made her say presently, "Maurice, I don't know what I should do without you." But to him it was life-giving. He choked a little and for once found no words to respond.

She wondered how much he understood of her

position. Since she had sat there the first gust of her anger against Edgar had died away. Lives were not disposed of so easily as all that. She was Edgar's wife for better for worse. Whatever his behaviour it did not release her from her bond. Iona was what might be called old-fashioned in her views by some people; divorce as a solution seemed to her impossible. Anything of that kind would in any case be unthinkable in connection with a man so straight and simple-minded as Durham. The future was shrouded in darkness, but as they were all living from day to day in imminent risk of death perhaps it did not much matter. This reminded her that of them all Durham stood much the nearest to the black shadow, and a feeling of hideous depression swept down on her as, in an instant's forecast, she seemed to see a day in which she and Edgar and Maurice survived, haggard and worn, but living, at the cost of leaving Durham's bones in the wilderness.

The bitterness of such a future appalled her. Life had at times been difficult enough before, but now that circumstances had brought about such a rapid deterioration in her husband, and she knew him for what he was, it would be ten times worse. He resembled a poor kind of electro-plate that wears away instantly when subjected to hard rubbing. Maurice Temple, who at first had seemed in many ways to be merely gilt, had, under the same process, revealed sterling silver underneath.

Edgar Pentland had been brought up by very narrow-minded people to have an overweening sense of his own importance. He came into the family property very young, and had lived entirely among those to whom his sway was undisputed.

He was not a bad landlord, as he had a great idea of keeping his own property up to a certain pitch of excellence; and though he was not beloved by either tenants or neighbouring proprietors, the former found him just and the latter acknowledged that he had a clever mind in some ways and could make his ideas felt.

Iona had been one of half-a-dozen sisters, very badly off. It was the common story. Edgar Pentland had been a excellent match from a worldly point of view, and she had been flattered by his preference, and had persuaded herself she loved him, never having known the real thing. After they were married she had realised that she had chosen husks, but set herself to make the best of it. She had not found him lacking in the little courtesies of ordinary life, and he was genuinely fond of her and very dependent on her. His popularity among his neighbours greatly increased with the advent of a charming wife, and they had plenty of interests in their country home.

Pentland had been trained from boyhood to the usual pastimes of a country gentleman; he was a fair rider, a passable shot, though both exercises were foreign to his nature, which was that of a collector or pedant. Though irritable, nervous and fussy, his wife had never had reason to doubt that underneath lay much good stuff. Now she could not conceal from herself that whatever "good stuff" there was had been due wholly to the habits and customs of his class and that underneath—— She dared not follow that thought! She was thankful that Maurice broke in by asking suddenly:

"How long has to-day seemed to you?"

"There has never been anything else," she

answered slowly. "Before it is nothing. Its beginning is lost in eternity. Yet I must have existed somewhere in another world, because I knew it was coming."

"Are you very unhappy, Iona?" It was the first time he had used her christian name, and she never noticed it; Maurice lay too far outside her circle ever to be thought of except as loved younger brother.

"Gloriously agonisedly happy," she answered on the impulse of the moment and then stopped, wondering why she had spoken the truth. For the moment she was that! She knew *he* cared; he had seen her, had looked at her with seeing eyes; from henceforth their souls could never be strangers; no longer was she to be thrust off by that distant glance by which he protected himself from intimacy. She was inside.

"I don't know what can be the end of it all," Maurice remarked. "Even if we escaped from here, there is the desert as profound as the ocean around. If only we could get a message through to the Hawk; that is what Durham has been trying day by day and night by night, but he has only tried the men and he can't find one to serve him. I would try the girls. I saw a really pretty girl one day——"

Iona had not been following, and had only caught the last words since Durham's name was introduced. Intuition had told her a good deal about Maurice, though he had always behaved quite circumspectly so far as she had known him; she came out with a jerk: "Oh, Maurice, you mustn't"—she paused for expression and used one of his own phrases—"get monkeying with any native girl, there would be terrible trouble."

That made Maurice laugh. "Don't you be afraid. These girls—why, the best of them is soaked in castor-oil, as another class of women soak in cheap scent—I couldn't go within a yard of one, don't you worry, you old Mother Grundy! Yet I suppose if I ever come across that sister of mine she will be like that."

He had certainly succeeded in arousing her astonished interest, as he wished to do, and there, within sight of the man to whom he had made a solemn promise not to tell of this complication, he broke it, knowing full well his offence would have been condoned in the unusual circumstances. So he told the story as he knew it, and managed to take Iona's mind off her own troubles for a time.

"I'm always on the look-out for the aristocratic lineaments and family birth-mark," he ended quaintly. "She is with the Bisharein, but not this tribe. It was much farther northward that Lance and I were to meet the Hawk and visit her. Her people are nomads and move about, which makes it much more difficult to get in touch with them; this branch of the Koatil is fairly well fixed here."

Iona had many questions to ask, and many details to hear. By tacit consent they did not return to the tents for the midday meal, but stayed where they were, keeping vigil over the strong figure against the tree.

About three o'clock their attention was attracted by a sound of weird music, the underlying tom-tom of the little drums and a light sound as of harp-strings. A terror at the same idea clutched Maurice and Iona simultaneously. Was this the preliminary to some horrible blood-sacrifice?

But an instant later they realised that the sound came from a cleared space in front of one of the tents, down in the valley. Two or three very tall thin men, with their sand-coloured wrappings wound around them like voluminous soiled dusters, were advancing toward the tent, beating their feet in a kind of two-step shuffle to the music. The musicians sat on a little knoll near, working hard. Against the hut four of the under-sized women of the Bisharein stood, clad in dirty white, with their hair in innumerable little tight pig-tails with silver ornaments worked in. They wore a profusion of silver and bead ornaments, chains and anklets and bracelets, and all these things rattled and clashed as they moved. One of them advanced to meet the men, throwing her dirty white garment in a whirl around her head as she did so, and revealing and concealing her face with a brilliant coquetry. She did a kind of quadrille, passing through the quartette of males and returning, and all the while worked her throat into prominence, throwing back her head as if she would dislocate her neck. When she had finished another woman took her place, one of the dancing men dropped out and was replaced by another, and so on interminably, but always there was one woman only dancing with four men. "I know what it is—a wedding dance," said Maurice suddenly. "Lance was telling me about it one day. The joke is the bridegroom is strictly secluded, sitting in one of those tents, and they are making merry on his behalf."

"Probably your sister has been through the ceremony then," Iona said.

"My sister? But she isn't married, she's only eighteen."

"Eighteen is very old for these people not to be married. I saw some little girls of ten whom I was told were married the other day," said Iona. "A bridegroom who is poor buys them young because they are cheaper, and then they are left to grow up before he claims them."

"Married! Good Lord!" ejaculated Maurice, his head in his hands. He had never thought of that! But he was forced to admit it was more than probable.

About five o'clock they passed back to their camp, and there found a miserable-looking figure sitting outside. A bowl of cold porridge stood beside him, but he had not touched it. He did not speak or ask any questions, and after about a quarter of an hour withdrew again into the recesses of the tent.

When the other two had eaten their ration Maurice departed on some errand of his own, and soon Iona heard unwonted sounds behind her. She turned and found that some of the Bisharein women were rigging up a new booth near the others. In some marvellous way Maurice had divined the situation, and persuaded the women, who were, as a rule, very good-natured, to put up an extra tent so that Iona could at least have privacy when she wanted it. With all his faults Maurice had a fine sensitiveness.

About seven o'clock Iona crept gladly into her new abode, taking with her her own saddle-bag, and lay down with her face to the door resting upon it. She half-dozed awhile and then woke to life with a shock as she heard Durhäm's voice outside.

He was striding up the slope, free and unaccompanied. She rightly judged he would much prefer

that she did not appear, and so she lay there thanking God in her heart that he had not to face the long hours of the night in that constrained position. He flung himself down on the ground, and turned and twisted to get the stiffness out of his limbs, while Maurice eagerly set before him the best he could provide. He had managed to get some coffee beans and ground them and made some of the native coffee.

Durham ate and drank heartily, and then lit his pipe and heaved a great sigh of satisfaction as he lay back with his face to the stars.

"Pretty bad, was it?" Maurice asked.

He removed his pipe and uttered one word, "Hell!" before putting it back and relapsing into silence. The one word conveyed more than volumes from a more talkative man, and it was not only the physical discomfort to which he referred.

CHAPTER VIII

THIES THE GERMAN

OBVIOUSLY it was not the intention of the Koatil to starve their chief prisoner, at any rate at present, but it was quite on the cards they might come every morning to carry him off and tie him up, day by day, under more and more unpleasant conditions, so it was an unspoken relief to the whole party when they met for their morning meal without interruption.

Maurice and Durham sent Edgar to Coventry, completely ignoring him, even when he ventured a few tentative remarks. Iona would willingly have followed their example; she wanted no explanation, still less did she desire to reproach this degraded creature, uncleaned and uncared for, from whom she felt a shuddering aversion, but it was impossible for her to ignore him wholly as did the others.

When the meal was finished he got up and, wandering away a few steps, began beating a bush with a stick he had picked up.

"'Ona, 'Ona," he said petulantly, quite in his old style, and again "'Ona, 'Ona!"

"Well?" she queried without moving.

"I want to speak to you."

"Go on," she responded indifferently.

"I want to speak to you alone."

The other two sprang to their feet instantly and withdrew. Iona rose slowly and went to her husband. "What is it you want to say?" she asked in a tone of aloofness quite new in her treatment of him.

He smiled ingratiatingly at her. It was evident he had no idea of how appalling he looked, with his skin orange-yellow in patches and blue under the eyes, surrounded by a fringe of beard and ragged dusty hair.

"You know I am sorry," he started uneasily. "It shan't happen again."

"'Can't' you mean," said Iona implacably. "How could you have done it, when, for all you knew, Major Durham might have been led away to his death?"

"If you're going to reproach me——" he exclaimed in an injured tone.

"I'm not. It's past reproach. You've done it now once and for always. Things can never be the same between us again."

"You don't understand," he said obstinately. "I admit I was wrong. I felt ill and meant to take a little as medicine to pull myself together, so that we could see what was best to be done; I only did take a very little, most of it was spilt. I wasn't in a fit state to stand it, all this hardship, and the sun has had its effect on me; I was really ill——"

"All of us have had to endure the same things; all our lives are in danger, Major Durham's most of all."

"A good thing too," he burst out, champing his jaw. "Wasn't it he who got us into this hole? He may be brave, but he is singularly unintelligent."

"Edgar! How dare you?"

"Dare, indeed! I repeat, a good thing if he did die, for his own sake too. He can never go back again after a ghastly blunder like this. He's broke, and can never resume his official position, and that's the truth about it."

There was just a small modicum of truth in what he said to catch attention. Iona realised for the first time how very much heavier must have been the weight on the Chief's mind than she had dreamed. What must his tortured thoughts have been all yesterday! Yet he had uttered no word of this subject, not even to Maurice, who would certainly have repeated it if he had. As she stood turning this over in her thoughts Edgar charged at her like a furious bull. "Don't think I don't understand," he growled. "It's not my illness yesterday—*that's* only a pretext to put me in the wrong—you're in love with Durham!"

If he had not the moment before shown Durham in a position of peculiar loneliness and difficulty and likely to lose all that made life worth living, Iona might have preserved her reticence, but now, spurred on, she cried out defiantly, "I do love him, because he is a man indeed!"

"So you're planning one way or another to get rid of me," said Edgar, drawing very near and looking unspeakably cunning. "I begin to understand better now; that stuff in the flask was heavily doctored." He did not really think so for a moment, and Iona knew he didn't, but the thought wafted over her how often she had accepted his insincerities and played up to them to save discussion; he expected her to do so now.

Those days were over. "Do face facts, and don't talk wildly," she said sharply; "we can't

even begin to think of the future; heaven alone knows if any of us will ever get back alive."

She was interrupted by Maurice, running up full of news. "At last they really have taken the Chief to see the sheikh, Ali Jalan," he cried. "He arrived with all that commotion the evening before last. The Chief is full of confidence he will now get some light on what he calls 'this ridiculous tragedy'; at any rate, we shall know what to expect instead of groping in a mist. He's away down there, but I was turned back." He waved to the lower end of the valley.

As he had said, Durham had started with the utmost willingness when he had assured himself that he should at last be brought face to face with the old rascal who was responsible for this unparalleled outrage. His attempts to argue with the ignorant followers, who had no real authority, had been like throwing water over a stone. On Ali Jalan, recognised sheikh, he might hope to make some impression.

When he passed round the shoulder of the valley for the first time, he noted with interest the extent of cultivated ground mostly covered with patches of dhurra, and here and there with some melon beds; there were here a better-looking lot of the tent-huts and even one or two rectangular mud-built houses. It was to one of these he was directed, and he saw as he drew near that it was a dignified architectural specimen for the wady, being made of well-formed putty-coloured hand-moulded mud bricks, and tall enough even for him to stand upright in.

As he approached the entrance he was stopped by a new man, evidently one of some authority, who ordered him to put his hands behind his back

to be tied. Durham felt an angry flare of blood rush to his face.

"I am unarmed; what harm can I do?" he expostulated.

"It is the order," the other repeated positively. "Without it you may not enter."

Durham considered for a second and then submitted under protest. His hands were caught together with a twist of rope at the back, and his captors fell away on each side to permit him to enter alone.

For the first moment, coming in from the sunshine outside to the comparatively gloomy interior, lighted only by the omission of a brick or two high up in the walls here and there, he could see nothing. Then he made out the figure of a man lounging on a sort of raised mud bench covered with goat-skins placed across the opposite wall. But it required a second or two more before his eyes took in, or his brain accepted, the fact that the man was a European and was known to him.

He had guessed Thies was at the bottom of all this trouble, but he had never expected to see him appear in it.

Yet Thies it was in a thin khaki-coloured riding suit who greeted him with a—

"Well, Major, our positions are reversed it seems. It's for you to bow and me to acknowledge the courtesy by an off-hand nod, if I choose. Bow, man, bow."

The German sprang up and advanced with the very obvious intention of hitting his prisoner over the head with a riding-cane he carried. Durham did not move a muscle, and something in his stern unwavering gaze seemed to draw the

energy out of the arm that held the switch. Perhaps Thies reflected that one gentleman does not strike another gentleman even when the other gentleman's hands are securely tied so that he cannot retaliate. Anyway, he sank back again, and to hide his momentary confusion lit a cigarette with as much swagger as he could throw into the action. He had gloated greatly over this glorious moment beforehand, but he had an uneasy feeling it wasn't going on quite the glorious lines he intended.

"If we are to discuss matters at all, Herr Thies," said Durham gravely, "I must request that you will free my hands."

"Will you give me your word of honour that you won't molest me in any way if I do?" Thies asked pompously.

"On my soul," said Durham with a sudden twinkle in his eye, "I don't know that I can."

"Then you must remain as you are."

"Be a sportsman and risk it," urged his most unconventional prisoner.

"I do not know what that means," replied Thies with lofty superiority.

"No, I don't suppose you do. Well, get on with it. What have you brought us here for? And what do you intend to get out of it?"

"I expect you know that as well as I do."

"Maybe. But I want you to tell me in your own inimitable way."

"You will have to learn that there is a power yet mightier than your little England, and that is Germany."

"I am learning."

Thies felt all at once that he was uncommonly glad he had the great and mighty German Empire

at his back, and not only his own little miserable state of Bavaria.

"It is not to be permitted that you shall dictate about this land of Egypt, who is to come into it and who not—it is not your country. One day you will see that when all the oppressed tribes and the miserable fellaheen rise as one man to sweep you into the sea——"

"Ah, ha, the Ordinance——"

"Yes, the Ordinance! You may not know, but you must learn that Germany finds it necessary to send her agents wherever she pleases."

"But—excuse me, Herr Thies—I *do* know, for that is exactly the reason which is influencing me in bringing forward this Ordinance."

"Without you it would fall to the ground——"

"That is to put the matter flatteringly; still I should not be the one to demur——"

"Your mephitic countrymen——"

"Pardon. My *what* countrymen?"

"Mephitic; it is a good English word. They wrap themselves always in a cloud of gas, and say no one shall see; they breathe it and are lulled to coma."

"Yes. I see now. It is the gas which is mephitic."

"You must not interrupt me when I talk—you are my prisoner."

Durham bowed slightly.

"Most of your countrymen do not believe that ever again shall there be war; they do not see the use of precautions. Some nations they despise too much to bother about, others, no, they cannot possibly dare to attack the great, the mighty England, who has sat for so many years on the top of everything. Well, that is all good, we

applaud it, but you, unfortunately for yourself, are not mephitic, and here to-day I have brought you to tell you that you must catch this infectious disease from your countrymen, get inoculated with it for your health's sake, if"—his tone altered and became very slow and impressive—"if, Bimbashi Durham, you are to live."

Durham did not speak.

"You do not say anything?"

"You told me not to speak."

"But now I say yes, you may speak, it is your turn, I have done; it is for you to say how things shall be."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do, you understand very well. You will now give me your most solemn unbreakable word of honour, that you will take no further part in getting this Ordinance passed, that if you are permitted to return to your headquarters you will furthermore do all in your power to remove from the minds of your fellow-countrymen any uneasiness you may have caused them."

"You would take my word of honour?" Durham asked in a low voice of astonishment.

"I would. Understand that in Germany we know very well your character and education and the characters of all your officers, naval and military, and of the officials and judges, who might be useful to us. If you give me, under such conditions as I shall indicate, your word of honour, I believe either that you will keep it, or that finding the strain too great you will blow out your brains, and either would suit us equally well."

"May I be allowed to ask a question?"

"But certainly."

"What steps did you take to prevent the authorities from getting uneasy about us?"

"A wire was sent as from you, saying that you had decided to take Mr. and Mrs. Pentland on your expedition. No search will be made until long after it will be any use to you."

"And the rest of the party? I can guess what will happen to me if I refuse, but what about them?"

"There will be an accident," said Thies thoughtfully—"yes, a very comprehensive accident that will happen to all of you. No one's fault, of course; these things do happen in the desert."

Before Durham's mind's eye there arose in response a picture of many a wind-blown sand hillock from which protruded a few bones or a fluttering rag. Quite easy certainly to add to the number of such hillocks.

"Is there no further choice?" he asked, rather to gain time than because he thought it probable there would be.

Thies brightened up. "But certainly. One. Not so difficult. Quite what a gentleman of honour might prefer. Your own death by apparent accident within the knowledge of your party."

Durham's eyes were fixed unwaveringly on his face and he explained further. "I mean an apparent accident as it would seem to them, in reality arranged by you. In that case, the rest of the party would be safely convoyed home with all the camels and the baggage and servants, to bear testimony as to the accidentalness of your death."

"And our friend the sheikh?" Durham inquired, with a return of his humour.

Thies shrugged his shoulders. "He would have

to face it out as best he could. It would not be very bad for him, and as long as you were dead he would get his price."

"You have bought the sheikh?"

"Have I not said so?" asked Thies with a touch of impatience.

"I must compliment you on your frankness; you do not gloze over anything."

"It is best with a man like you."

"You are not expecting an immediate answer I take it?"

"Not immediate."

"How long have you decided to give me to think over this very momentous matter?"

"Three days."

Durham bowed very low, and received, as he expected, an off-hand nod. He laughed aloud and left Thies biting his lips with mortification—mockery he could not stand.

When Durham was half-way back to the tents Maurice sprang out on the path. "Good news?" he asked eagerly. "Why, Chief, what has changed you since yesterday? You went out this morning as gay as a bridegroom, and you're not even dashed now after the ceremony."

"It *is* Thies," said Durham.

"Here? The dickens it is! Has he shown his hand?"

"Fairly. At any rate, we're all quite safe for three days, and then I'm to see him again, and it will be strange if I can't come to terms with him." Not a word more than this could be got out of him, but Maurice and Iona were both cheered by the difference in his aspect. He did not himself attribute this sudden buoyancy to its root-cause; he only felt that now he knew what he was up

against, now that he had a flesh and blood foe instead of a vague mystery to tackle, his spirits had risen.

As they sat on their mats that night before turning in, Maurice said suddenly, "I suppose you owe it to that little German blackguard that you were trussed up?"

"Probably."

"He wanted to bring you into a proper state of mind for the interview! What nuts for him! In spite of all his bombast, he must have some sand in him to carry through a big scheme like this. What is the secret of his power?"

"Rifles," replied the practical Durham. "I'm wondering how he's going to get them into the country."

CHAPTER IX

"MY SISTER!"

THE three days of grace ebbed away, and on the morning of the last of them—it happened to be a Thursday—Maurice wandered off by himself, seized for the fiftieth time with a great desire to see behind the forbidden shoulder of the hill. He went nonchalantly, stopping to pull a twig off a bush here and there, zig-zagging up and down, in order to appear aimless; he hoped that as he was comparatively unimportant and alone he might not be followed and turned back. His hopes were realised, for he was allowed to get to the crest of the shoulder without molestation, and, full of delight, he lay down in the scrub and looked over. He saw the illimitable desert stretching away to the East and in the near foreground the women working in the fields, and some drawing water from the wells with a creaking groaning apparatus that looked as if it would break in two as each leathern bucket came to the surface. The women who were coming up with their water made a pretty procession, seen thus in the distance, with their burdens poised by one hand, stepping freely in their unbecoming dingy garments, always much darker than those of the men. Maurice was lying only a few yards off one of the little well-beaten tracks on the hill-side, and he hoped some

of them might come that way, and presently one did.

Her head and shoulders appeared suddenly above the bend in the narrow path, and he, being quite hidden beneath a bush, lay still to watch her. She had her back to the morning light, so could only be seen in dark silhouette; the line of the cloth which covered her head forming one side, and the bare arm steadying the earthenware pot the other. As she emerged, rising higher with the path, Maurice saw she was much taller than the majority of the women, and the sun, catching the side of her head which was uncovered, showed her hair as lighter coloured than the rest. His heart gave a great gasp of expectation, but as he made a slight movement to see her better, there was scrunch of boots on the path behind the girl, and she swung to face the man who came up after her. Even by his outline alone he was easily recognised as Thies. He had evidently been following the girl deliberately, for he laughed when he caught her up, and made a rude clutch at the shawl over her head. She faced him startled, and Maurice's heart leapt with excitement, for seen thus her profile was the replica of his own! He knew it well, for he had often studied it; the rather rounded forehead with the hair starting unusually far back, the softly moulded mouth and chin; there were no abrupt angles, it was all curves, giving an impression of indefiniteness.

The sudden drag at the head-cloth had unbalanced the pot, and the girl caught at it with both hands, then released one to push Thies away. Her colouring was a good deep coffee-colour, but lighter than that of the average Bisharein woman.

Thies caught hold of the wrist of the outstretched arm with his right hand, and put his left arm round her waist to draw her to him. Maurice saw a veritable demon of anger leap into that softly curved face, but hampered as she was by the heavy pot on her head, the girl could not for the moment defend herself.

It was with a bound like a surprise snake leaping out of a trick camera that Maurice shot out upon the surprised German, catching him a left-hander on the jaw that sent him flying backwards into the scrub full length.

The girl staggered as he broke away, then recovered herself with a cat-like quickness, flung her shawl over her face, and vanished like a puff of smoke.

"Come on," said Maurice, stepping over to his fallen foe. "You richly deserved all you got. But you can have a go at me any time and welcome."

Thies gathered himself up, rubbed his head and face very hard all over, picked up his sun-helmet and rose deliberately.

Without a word he strode past Maurice and disappeared down the path the way he had come.

"I'm in the soup," reflected Maurice as he returned to the tents, where he found Iona and Durham, to whom he related his exciting story.

"She's my sister, bet you any money, feel it in my bones," he ended up. "Yes, Iona knows all about it. Jolly fine girl too."

Durham was greatly interested, but sceptical. He feared Maurice's imagination had carried him away. "The girl is not here at all," he objected, "much farther north with the Mallak."

"But the Mallak are nomads; they may be here

on a visit. What about all that commotion of arrival?"

"It is possible."

"What's the Bisharein word for 'sister,' Chief?" Maurice ran on.

"Tukato."

"If I say that she'll think I'm speaking metaphorically. What's the word for 'metaphorically' in Bisharein?"

"Absurd Maurice!" said Iona.

"It is absurd, the whole thing! I feel as if I were dreaming. Just jump your thoughts back a fortnight or three weeks ago to when we were coming up from Cairo to Luxor with that blackguard German as a fellow-passenger among us. How we chaffed him! He's got a chance to get a bit of his own back now. What will he do, do you think?"

Neither of the others answered and Maurice rambled on.

"If he tries to tie me up to a tree I'll fight and get killed, couldn't take it quietly like you, old man, I'd bust internally. Somehow those things don't matter a needle-point to you, you always look so confoundedly dignified through them all. No one is ever able to throw a net over you; you've got an aura that disperses it. I wish I knew the trick. Anyone can throw a net over me, but they shan't. I'll bite and kick and scratch like a wild cat. Perhaps that bounder will order me to be flogged. What would you do then?" He looked inquiringly at his cousin, who was biting a piece of twig.

"Wait and see," was all the answer vouchsafed.

"Not a spark of imagination in you! Half

the pleasure in life is leaping ahead and picturing ills that may never come. Hullo, here's an ill that has most decidedly come! Now the band begins to play."

Thies had indeed appeared, trying hard to look unflustered and very dignified; he was smoking a large cigar, from which fact he hoped to gain moral support, and was accompanied by a small posse of armed Bisharein. He came to a stand-still in front of the trio and began as if he were delivering a lecture.

"You will now all attend to me——"

"Not a bad-looking chap either," commented Maurice in an audible aside. The German's skin was a clear golden brown, his little silky moustache shone glittering in the light. His whole appearance was very neat and precise.

"You do not seem to understand," he exclaimed, making a fresh start. "You are prisoners, in my power to treat as I like. Your manners do not show the proper respect. You," indicating Durham with his cigar, "are beginning to learn." A flicker of amusement crossed Durham's face as he gravely saluted in acknowledgment.

"As for you," went on Thies, forgetting his dignity and becoming heated as he turned to Maurice, "you are quite undisciplined, a young cub——"

"Hold hard there, no names," cried out Maurice audaciously.

"It is as I say, you are quite undisciplined. You have never felt the hand of authority. It is certainly not good for you to wander at liberty. Therefore you must now go to closer confinement. Stand up."

They all three stood up.

"Quick, march," said Thies, indicating the path before him.

"All of us?" Durham asked.

"Yes. All of you."

"One moment, please." He plunged into the tent and returned, dragging out Edgar, who looked half-dazed, and blinked in the light.

So they started; Iona in front with her scarecrow of a husband, and Durham behind with his hand on Maurice's shoulder.

They passed down the whole length of the valley, between some of the natives who paused in their work to look at them. They went round the bend and came to the place where Durham's interview had taken place. Here they were guided to a mud hut very similar in style to that which had been occupied by Thies, and this was indicated to them as their future place of residence.

"All of us in that one hut?" Durham asked sternly.

"Yes."

"I protest. The lady and her husband ought to have a hut to themselves."

Iona glanced at him beseechingly; she felt that whatever ills there might be in the close confinement, to be alone with Edgar would terrify her more.

"No use protesting," replied Thies, grinning, "unless——" But what he was going to suggest remained for ever in the recesses of his nasty mind, for Durham and Maurice wheeled so instantaneously upon him he thought better of it. By his gesture they understood very well he would have proposed to accommodate the lady only in his own quarters. However, he had not uttered the words.

"At least we shall have our baggage," said Durham after a pause.

"It is here."

Several of the natives came from behind, with the leathern saddle-bags, and dumped them down inside. Thies made a motion for the party to enter, but stopped Durham as he was following last.

"A word with you, Bimbashi. The three days I gave you are exactly over, to an hour; what is your reply?"

They strolled a few feet away from the hut, and stood on the edge of a sharp drop in the ground which fell to the cultivated plots below. Durham stood with his hands in his pockets considering.

"I must try to impress on you, Herr Thies," he said at last, "that you are playing a very dangerous game."

"Dangerous? I have played with danger all my life and gloried in it! All the world over they know me; they say 'Here comes Thies, that devil of a man'!"

"In that case I should imagine you had gained some experience as to what was possible——"

"Cut it short," broke in Thies rudely. "I have told you my plans, well considered and digested they have been. Are you going to give me your word of honour as to that Ordinance?"

"No."

"Are you going to arrange that other little comedy I spoke of?"

"I confess I find that difficult too."

Durham was no diplomatist.

"Then you know the issue. To-morrow at dawn, be ready, all of you, for camels will be wait-

ing to convey you—home." He added the last word with an indescribable leer.

Durham was weighing the possibility of what would happen if he seized the man by the throat and choked him then and there. He could easily have done it before being overpowered, but what then? Would not the consequences be worse for those whose lives depended on his? He would certainly not escape alive out of the mêlée that would follow, and what chance would there be then for these poor helpless sheep? Better not.

Thies was watching his expression maliciously. "Splendid animals, Bimbashi," he said. "All selected by myself, *thelul*, best riding camels, ample provisions, and, *of course*, abundance of water in fresh wholesome skins."

Durham looked at him searchingly, and Thies' eyes fell as he snapped viciously, "Get into your hut."

The hut was about ten feet by eight. The floor was of beaten mud and there was no raised seat as there had been in the other hut. There was just room for the four of them, each sitting in one corner, to stretch their legs toward the centre and fit in. The walls were solid and the roof was made of young straight palm stems, built into the structure as rafters and covered with a hard plaster of mud and palm leaves. There were one or two blocks of mud omitted up near the roof for light and air. After Durham entered, the door was closed behind him, and he saw it was formed of that priceless possession, a sheet of corrugated iron, probably serving many other purposes also. It was laboriously fitted into position by strong pointed sticks driven into the ground

at an angle outside and slanted against it, so that any attempt to push it from inside would only force them in deeper.

"A palace of a place," said Durham cheerfully as he entered, and he immediately set to work, with Maurice's help, to make a sort of throne-seat in one corner for Iona, with two of the saddle-bags, throwing over it one of the brown cloaks that they had been supplied with.

It was insupportably warm now at midday, and there was a close smell from the mud of the bricks.

For Iona's sake Maurice nerved himself to make a noble offer; he bent over Edgar, who was stretched full length along one side, and offered to shave him, saying he still had a scrap of soap and half a tea-cupful of water, too bad to drink, in the bottom of one of the skins. But Edgar would not even answer; he waved him away and settled down with his face to the wall. On all of them there fell a great silence. So they waited for hour after hour. Yet for two in that mouldy-smelling place, there was, in spite of all menace, the peace of a deep underlying content.

About two o'clock there was a shuffling outside, and through one of the air-holes, which was about sixteen inches by twelve, a bag of beans and a small waterskin were thrust in. The water was tepid and horribly bitter, but they shared it in silence.

The portion of beans was so small that Iona insisted on counting them, because she said each bean was really valuable. But her real reason was that she was afraid in the dim light the men would give her too many.

She and Maurice dozed most of the afternoon,

reviving again as the heat evaporated from the porous bricks, and the air got a little cooler.

Durham had spent the afternoon wondering when he should tell the others what they had to face. Even yet he did not take too pessimistic a view of their position. After ten days surely the Hawk would have got news of them somehow, and to escape from the wady, even on mangy camels, might leave a possibility for getting in touch with him. Yet he postponed his news, finally resolving he would wait until darkness fell.

Seven o'clock came at last, so far as they could judge by feeling the hands of their watches, which were still going.

Edgar woke up and began munching the portion of beans that had been set aside for him, with quite unnecessary noise and emphasis.

"Wonder if we'll get any dinner," sighed Maurice. And as he spoke a shower of something hard and rather heavy fell all over them.

"Beetles," shrieked Iona, her nerves strung taut, with a lively remembrance of the hideous horny scarabeus she had seen in the sand. She thought that the cool of the evening had loosened a swarm of beetles from the roof!

Maurice gingerly felt one of the fallen lumps. "Not a beetle," he averred. "Got no legs, doesn't bite. Is it worth one of our precious matches to examine it, Chief?"

"Give it to me; I'll tell you without."

After a moment's fingering he announced, "I think it's a date."

"Dates!" they exclaimed eagerly, excited at the notion of such a treat.

"I'll soon see when I get my teeth into it!"

"Oh, brave man! Great soul!" mocked

Maurice; "suppose it's a beetle after all, stripped of its legs, or a locust?"

Durham gave a laugh and hesitated. "It's not worth a match," he said. "I've only got six left," and the next instant he laughed outright. "Duffers all of us, of course it's a date, I've found the stone."

Infallible test! The next moment they were scrambling and tumbling over each other like children at a school feast. Even Edgar joined in the game, and they did not stop until not one was left on the ground.

"They must have come through the window," said Iona at last.

"Somebody loves me," piped Maurice.

Durham had been thinking the same and his hopes were raised.

"What ho, for a smoke!" Maurice suggested presently. "Any bacca left?"

"A little."

For some time past they had been mixing their own tobacco with some coarse native-grown stuff to eke it out.

"I have some," said Edgar unexpectedly from his corner. It was the first time he had ever volunteered to share any of his private possessions with the others, and they accepted his offer, thanking him gratefully.

"All ready?" Durham asked before striking a match. It came to Maurice last, and Durham adjured him to hurry up and take it. "But I don't like it," he objected. "I'm number three. Dead within the year, you know."

"Rot!"

"I didn't know you were so superstitious, Maurice."

He pulled out a straw from one of the mud bricks and lit it at the fast expiring flame. "Saved by a hair's-breadth," he ejaculated. "Death comes very near, but misses his clutch."

"I suppose death is very near to all of us," said Iona thoughtfully.

"What if it is?" the boy asked carelessly. "Seems to me at any time we've only got to crash through into a new dimension and we're there."

Durham felt his moment had come, but he dreaded to tell them; reticence was inborn in him, and to speak of these matters which affected them all so profoundly, seemed to him almost an indecency, but it had to be done.

His voice came out of the darkness, pregnant with meaning. "There is something you ought to know."

A slight stir told him he had their attention.

"You have gathered, of course, what has made Thies embark on this mad adventure? He was quite frank about it. It is this Ordinance. The extraordinarily dangerous lengths to which the Germans are prepared to go to stop its passing, show of what vital importance to the country it is. It sounds well-nigh incredible, but this little German trickster would have taken my word of honour that I would drop the Ordinance if I got back safely, and would do all in my power to prevent anyone else taking it up."

"The alternative?" gasped Maurice.

"The alternative is that we leave here to-morrow at dawn on broken galled camels, insufficiently equipped with food and water, to take our chance in the desert."

A spasmodic "woof" like the snort of a bear came from Edgar's corner. "You refused?" he

boomed out. "You refused, you dastardly coward? Our lives are nothing to you, compared with your own comfort and peace of mind. I—I——" He stuttered and choked with rage, collapsing into aimless mutterings and flappings in his corner.

"Say, Chief," began Maurice tentatively, "isn't there something about promises extracted by force not being valid? Was there no road out that way?"

Durham seemed troubled. "I did think of it," he said in a more uncertain tone than any of them had ever heard him use. "But to tell you the truth I'm such an ass at that sort of game I couldn't do it, not with enough conviction to deceive Thies."

"Sounds pretty straight," said Maurice after a pause. "What do you think, Iona?"

"If one *could* be so brave——" she broke out, then stopped and went crimson in the darkness.

Edgar had dragged himself from his corner and, feeling for Durham's collar, clutched it in one shaking hand, and began to pummel his face with the other. The attack was so unexpected that for a minute the big man did not understand what was happening. Then he caught Pentland's wrists and forced him back into the corner without a word. But in spite of his caution the others had understood very well what had occurred, especially when Edgar poured out a string of horrible oaths and curses on Durham's head, and went on muttering and raving even when firmly held down in his corner. Iona crept over to him, and, loosening Durham's grip, put him away, and laid her hands on her husband's head.

"Edgar, you are mad," she said, and began to cry softly. The air of the little cell was thick

with discomfort. At length Edgar subsided, and Iona felt Maurice's hand groping for hers as with the corner of his coat he wiped her tears away, and sat on her other side.

The night air was now quite chilly, but Durham felt the sweat pouring down his face as he sat in the darkness with his hands locked together between his knees. That was how they looked at it? As if it were a question between the paltry sacrifice of his honour and the salvation of their lives! It was not quite that, there was the country behind too, and theoretically he ought to have sacrificed all their lives sooner than betray the country's interests. However, there would be no question of that, but would he ever be able to explain? Never had he felt so inarticulate. Never before, however, had he cared a button what people thought of him. After a long interval he began again.

"It isn't all up, you know. After all we may find our best chance in the desert. We've been very closely guarded here. Night by night I've tried to get out, but have always been thwarted; I shouldn't have thought so much of that, but I have no doubt whatever the Hawk is hovering somewhere near, and if he hasn't been able to get in touch with us it shows you how vigilant they are. Once we are free of this place we may find him waiting. If not, after we have made the experiment, I've a last card to play which is infallible."

He did not specify what that last card was, for he did not mean to die if he could help it; he was more keen than ever on getting that Ordinance through, and what evidence he had of the need for it now!

His mind ran on about the desert. "I know every well in this district by the map, I've made a special study of them, and I've collected a fair amount of grain in my saddle-bag—it's all here."

While he was still speaking something hurtled in through the hole in the wall and fell with the impact of a small heavy stone on his knee. He felt it and found it to be a shaped bit of metal wrapped round in paper. He knew exactly what it was, and his heart thrilled with contentment. He asked Maurice to collect all the long straws he could from the sides of the hut so as to keep a light going, and then he struck a match. He was holding a tiny bronze statue of Horus the Hawk-god, not more than three inches high, and on the paper in pencil was written, "Be ready at midnight and follow the messenger I will send."

The atmosphere of the hut seemed magically charged with the electricity of hope. The spirits of all except Edgar bounded upwards, and he remarked surlily, "Trick, of course, to trap us, you fool!"

The others heeded him not; already they were transferring from their saddle-bags, which would presumably have to be left behind, the small comforts which they could carry in their pockets. Durham opened his store of golden maize, and from it they filled up every available pocket, and Iona put some in a handkerchief and knotted it to her waist.

Exactly at twelve a slight scratching was heard by the window hole, and Durham, standing by it, heard a whisper in Bisharein. "Ayam," which signifies "water," followed by the gentle sound of water being poured to loosen the hard-baked bricks. With a will he worked from inside to

help, and in ten minutes two of the great blocks had been detached, leaving a hole large enough for a person to squeeze through. It was moonlight outside, but this side of the hut was in black darkness, so that it was difficult at first to discern in what form the deliverer came, but it was presently seen that it was a native woman in the usual black flowing shawl.

She threw back her head-gear a little as Durham's face came into the opening, and whispered eagerly, "Nafeesa, Englees me, you my tribe."

It was perfectly clear that this was the girl Maurice had helped when she was insulted by Thies; and that she was the girl for whose sake the whole idea of the expedition had been started could not possibly be in doubt. But there was no time to go into that matter now. Durham began questioning her in the quaint mixture of Bisharein helped out by Arabic, which he generally found sufficient, and he presently turned to the others to interpret.

"Maurice, this girl actually *is* your sister. It must be the same girl you saw this morning. Her name is Nafeesa. She says the Hawk is here with camels, down below in the desert, just outside the northern side of the wady. He got into communication with her and persuaded her to help us. She is going to take us to him, one by one, for a party would attract attention. She has a woman's shawl here, and says no one will take heed of two women flitting about at night. It's a little risky, of course, but it's a good chance. Maurice, you must go first, then if you get there safely, Mrs. Pentland can follow."

Maurice submitted, for there was no argument possible. He slipped easily through the hole,

dropped on to the bricks on which Nafeesa had stood to raise her up, and was instantly swathed smotheringly by a filthy-smelling black garment thick with dust. He tried to clear it out of his mouth at any rate, but Nafeesa thrust it back with a determined hand, and gave him a quick pull to show that she would guide him, as he was almost blindfold.

He stumbled along as best he could, and together they passed from the shadow into the bright moonlight. She let him free then, and made him follow in her tracks, which he did with difficulty, as he could only see the extreme edge of her mouldy and jagged petticoat, but he thought to himself he could have followed without sight at all, merely by the overwhelming odour of castor-oil which she carried with her.

Along the tiny track they went, down the side of a hill, up among some bushes, then suddenly Nafeesa stopped, and catching his arm again, forced him violently down behind some bushes. Her muscular strength surprised him. He positively wilted under the force of her grip, and bit his lip not to cry out at the suddenness of the pain. She crouched down opposite to him, and he dared to remove the corner of his face-cloth.

"You my tukato," he said, greatly venturing.

She turned to look at him, lifting the flap of her garment also, and brought her homely but intelligent face quite near to his. As he gazed at it, seeing it plainly in the moonlight, it struck him as a sort of ludicrous climax that she had a tiny gold stud fixed through her right nostril!

She had evidently understood what he meant; perhaps she had already been prepared for it by the Hawk, with whom she had been in communi-

cation. She drew a ring from her strong work-worn finger and handed it to Maurice. He could make out it was of heavy old-fashioned gold with a heart's-ease in turquoises on it.

And wafting into his mind from the dim recesses of memory came the recollection of playing with such a ring on a very soft white hand, when he was a tiny child. His mother's name had been Pansy. He wondered if the girl would understand any English.

"Nafeesa, will you come back to England with me?" he asked very slowly and distinctly.

To his surprise she understood completely.

"Married, me," she replied complacently.

"To a Bishary?" he asked with a sinking heart.

She nodded. "Big man, four wives, much camel." She put her hand outspread on Maurice's breast and pressed her fingers one by one. "All and one more," she said, indicating six. "Me," tapping her own breast.

He understood the big man with four wives had paid the heavy price of six camels for her.

"Is he kind to you?"

This she did not understand at all, so she nodded her head again, repeating, "Big man, much camels," as if Maurice could not have understood.

Then suddenly she recollected her important mission, and gazed about, listening intently, to see if what had disturbed her fine senses with a presentiment of danger, had subsided; it evidently had, for she rose abruptly, and once more they threaded their way down between the stripped scarecrow bushes, gleaming white as coral in the moonlight. It was utterly unlike anything Maurice had dreamed of as the setting of this dramatic meeting, but it fitted in admirably.

Meantime in the hut silence reigned. The minutes seemed hours. Judged by sensation dawn ought to have appeared long before Nafeesa's dark head blocked the opening once more.

Durham was waiting; he took the garment from her and arranged it over Mrs. Pentland's shoulders before she scrambled out. But she caught his wrist. "Wouldn't it be best? Edgar?" she asked elliptically.

"No," he said quietly, and from that syllable there was no appeal, so she meekly climbed through, and passed on after her girl-conductor, but as she did so her heart was in a clutch of real agony which seemed to prevent her breathing. So many things might happen before the Chief could join them. And his life was most in danger! What if Edgar proved obstinate and refused to come? She had urgently impressed on him in a low voice the necessity for caution and celerity, on which all their lives depended, and he had seemed to assent. But it was with an anxious and troubled mind she climbed the brow of the hill and dropped down on the other side in her turn.

"When the girl comes back you will be ready to go, Pentland?" said Durham presently.

There was no answer.

But after a minute came a low growl like that of a wild beast. "My wife loves you, she says it, says she loves you, without shame—think of that! Do you suppose I am going to let you get out of here alive?"

Durham came over to him. "Stop that," he said sharply. "I tell you plainly that if you give any trouble I shall knock your head against the wall and carry you down senseless."

He put his massive fist against Edgar's temples and pressed his head on the hard wall. "Easily done," he remarked. Not being hampered now by the presence of a woman he could act as he thought best. Edgar spoke no more.

This time the girl messenger came back more quickly.

She pointed at Durham and tried to throw the cloak over him.

"He must go first," objected Durham, seizing the inert figure in the corner by the arm and dragging it to the opening.

She explained hastily in her own tongue that the light would soon come, they must hasten, and the Hawk said they must both come together.

"Very well."

He heaved up Edgar, now collapsed into a shaking mass, through the opening, and Nafeesa received him on the other side, and flung the spare garment about him. "There is nothing left for you," she said rather wistfully, looking at Durham, attracted as all who have lived open-air lives are, by the power of physical perfection. It seemed to her mere wicked waste to bother with a weak fool like this other man.

"Go ahead, I will follow," he commanded and watched them off, Edgar stumbling along in a gaunt clumsy way enough to betray him to the most unobservant.

Durham stood outside in the shadow of the hut waiting until they had a start, and in his heart was a radiant gladness, a great uplifting. It seemed as if the morning stars sang together in the skies, "She says she loves you!" It was incredible! Never had life been more gloriously attractive than now.

He allowed the two black figures to get as far as possible before actually disappearing, then swiftly doubling down to hide his height, he slipped after them from bush to bush in a way amazing in one of his size. Reaching the top of the next rise he saw them again, and waited once more, repeating the process. There seemed to be no one about. The distance was considerable, and he had grown hot with his exertions before they reached the last ridge, after which the ground fell rapidly to the plain below. He allowed the two muffled heads to drop beneath the ridge, and then, as he prepared to follow, Bedlam broke loose.

The din seemed to be the loudest ahead over the ridge, but farther to the right than where the two had just vanished, and as he bounded to the top to see what was happening, he heard the unmistakable crack of a revolver—that must be the Hawk!

He gained the ridge and could discover nothing of the two dark figures which had just preceded him, but immediately below was a steep drop, almost perpendicular, like the face of a cliff, with scraggy bushes and jagged stones adorning it. To the right there was pandemonium, which showed that the whole Bisharein force was up in arms. To the left the cliff swung along, keeping extremely steep, into a kind of peak or headland, which ran out like a cape into the desert. It did not look promising. The whole of this side of the hill, facing north, was in the shadow, but now Durham's eyes could distinguish some dark lumps on the sand below, which were either camels or rocks, and at that second the revolver spoke again and the flash came from this group. That was the point to make for! It was no use to take half-

measures. Without hesitation Durham flung himself bodily down the side of the cliff; he lost his footing and rolled, scratching and bruising himself horribly, until he clutched at a great stone and hung on, then once more he let go, continuing his headlong fall until he landed upon a stiff outcrop of rock some twenty feet from the ground, where he could now clearly see the flicker of clothes and the shapes of kneeling camels among some rocks. Without hesitation he leaped off, landing with a stunning thump on the sand below, luckily missing the rocks, but feeling for the moment unable to move, as if his spine were paralysed. This only lasted another second or two, when he dragged himself up, and limped to the side of a native figure by the foremost rock.

Well he knew it was Dilir, and flung himself down beside him without hesitation. "Pistol!" he cried.

"Temple has one behind," said Dilir, firing again at the place whence came the most noise in the scrub above and ahead.

Durham looked round; about twenty yards back were the three camels, as much under cover of the rocks as was possible, and by them crouched Maurice and Iona. In two strides he was beside them, but as he crossed the open space an unmistakable rifle bullet sped by him. The Bisharein had got something else besides spears and shouting now!

Durham snatched the pistol from Maurice's hand, and thrust at him instead a pocket compass. "Mount with Iona," he commanded, "and make for Telat Abda; remember, repeat it, Telat Abda, north-north-west from here and a day's journey. We will follow and overtake or meet you there."

The order was overwhelming! As Maurice

rose mechanically to obey, he felt it to be utterly impossible of achievement. Bullets were flying round them now, but Durham had spoken as concisely and quietly as if he had still been in the hut. He lifted Iona on to the camel, waited until Maurice got up behind, then made the beast rise, and gave it a whack to set it off, before he sprang back to Dilir's side. Maurice had handed him the cartridges for the pistol as he got up, but there were not many, and it was obviously necessary to husband them.

"No rifles?" Durham asked as he swung down into place by Dilir.

"None. Impossible. These don't carry far, but it frightens them. Are you hit?" as he saw Durham move stiffly.

"Only a touch in the leg—nothing to worry about. Where on earth are the others?"

"I was going to ask you!"

The Hawk turned his keen face, shining with joy, to his companion; he was in the heart of the wildest adventure, and the life ran coursing in his veins.

"They were ahead of me—Pentland and the girl."

"Nafeesa is A 1; she'll bring him round another way."

The bullets buzzed and sang intermittently—evidently rifles were few. The cover was not bad, and luckily for the two comrades they were very indistinctly seen. The Bisharein had not yet overflowed from their rocks and shrubs into the plain.

"We must wait," said Dilir presently.

"I want to wait until that d——d German appears and give it to him in the neck."

"He won't give you a chance," laughed Dilir softly.

The Bisharein were getting rather tired of yelling and shouting at their foe, brandishing their weapons and shooting into the dark. Those who held the precious rifles began to consider their not very large store of cartridges, and for a moment there was a lull. Then some of the more cunning among them devised the plan of getting along the precipitous side of the hill more directly over the two men with the camels, and one of those who had a rifle climbed to the out-jutting piece of rock from whence Durham had leapt. Keen-eyed Dilir watched his progress from bush to rock, and waited patiently. As the fellow put the rifle to his shoulder the revolver spat out. He was within range and fell backwards, then tumbling head over heels landed with a sickening scrunch on the sand, full force on his head, and lay with his spine curved in a monstrous attitude. Before Durham knew his intention the Hawk leaped light-footed from his cover, caught the man's rifle from his clutching hand and, bending beneath the body for shelter, collected the cartridges and spun back. Several bullets flew round him, but the shooters were partly cut off from seeing him by the scrub, and not one hit him.

Durham drew a breath. "Bit risky," he exclaimed.

"Worth it. You shoot better than me, Bimbashi." He handed the prize to him.

"One of our own back again," said Durham, handling the rifle with affection. "Luck that!" He proceeded to put it into action.

But as the minutes sped by and there was no sign of either Pentland or the girl, Durham grew

uneasy. "We can't stay here until daylight," he said. "They'd have us at their mercy then. We can't leave Pentland behind." He was perplexed.

"Or the girl," supplemented Dilir.

"Does she want to come?"

"No, but I shall take her. There are two camels. She would be murdered for this."

"She has a husband?"

"He is old, many wives," said Dilir contemptuously.

A faint far flush of pink showed in the sky.

"Dawn!" exclaimed Durham. "Where are they?"

As he spoke a bullet from a revolver, fired much nearer than any heretofore, missed his head by an inch; it came from right-angles somewhere on the precipice, yet not a sign was there of anyone there at whom they could fire.

"That's the German," said Durham with conviction. "Decent shooting. He's got us on the flank too."

Another bullet struck the rock under his nose, sending a dangerous shower of slithers flying upwards.

It was obviously necessary to retreat out of revolver range. With one accord they bolted, splitting in different directions, and meeting again behind the camels some distance back.

"He'll have to get a rifle now," muttered Durham as they dropped into safety. He glanced round as he spoke, and saw two dishevelled-looking women coming toward them from behind the point of the cliff which stuck out cape-like into the sand. For the first moment he was on his guard against trickery, but then he understood.

"They are safe! The sooner we're off the better."

It was indeed time. The two black figures ran toward them, and as they drew near Durham handed the rifle to Dilir, caught the taller one and almost flung it across the saddle of the nearest camel. "Hang on like grim death, for if you fall off I shan't pick you up," he warned threateningly. Then to Dilir, "Ready?"

"Yes, yes." Dilir emptied the rifle in two successive shots at two figures which, greatly daring, had left the cover of the hill-side and emerged on to the sand. He grinned with satisfaction as he saw one double up, fall and flap, while the other ran back. Then with a twist he had Nafeesa across his saddle, kicked his camel into activity, and was off after the other one, already swallowed up in the thin mist that often creeps round the oases of the desert in the early morning.

CHAPTER X

A WILD WOOING

By noon the same day the heat and glare from the desert seemed something solid to be broken through as a crust. The sun, in unrestrained glory, flooded down on the burning sand and made of it an endless basin with shallow rims, containing a suffocating and unendurable heat. In the midst of this waste moved on slowly a single camel, with lagging steps, bearing a double burden, the swathed figure of a woman, and a man in Arab dress with a turban on his head. It was Dilir and Nafeesa.

A light desert wind had sprung up soon after they left the wady in haste, and though eventually it blew away the swathing mist of morning, it effectually obliterated also the tracks of the camels which had gone before, wantonly smothering them in handfuls of silky sand as if to mock playfully the pursuing riders. There was nothing for it but to make for the rendezvous.

Before the full light had cleared the sky Dilir knew all that Nafeesa thought about him—robber, spoiler, defiler of honest men's houses, but her vituperation had fallen like hail off a slate roof. She had not made any very violent struggles to get down, possibly because the grip of his iron arm showed her how useless it would be, but she had poured the prodigality of her vocabulary upon him

freely in the Bisharein tongue, and he had remained unmoved. He knew better than she what would be her fate if she returned after having helped to outwit the sheikh.

He had foreseen that, even when he had played on her girlish love of romance, persuading her to help her "own tribe" the English, in danger of death. She had at last agreed, led by a spirit of curiosity, a strange stirring of the blood, and half-a-dozen other sensations she had no names for, but she had never meant to launch out into the wilderness with the rescued party, still less with Dilir alone, who, to her, seemed far the most dangerous of all, because in his present costume he was not unlike the men to whom she was accustomed.

The gradual rising of the sun, and its beating heat, had diminished her energy, and for an hour there had been silence between them. Though Dilir had cursed the wind that blew away Durham's tracks, he was at least satisfied that it must have performed the same good office for his own. Nevertheless he constantly looked round searchingly to the rear for that far-off feather of dust which would mean pursuit; these dwellers in the wilderness were cleverer at their own craft than he, and might track him by ways he knew not of. So far he was safe, but he dared not pause, even in the dread heat of midday, and urged the jaded camel on, at all events for as far as he could get it to go before it refused to move.

All at once, without the slightest warning, or any sort of apparent reason, the beast crossed its legs, and fell with a sickening lurch, sending Nafeesa flying yards over its head and pinning Dilir beneath its huge bulk. There it lay without attempting to rise, an evil-smelling lump. Luckily

the full weight of its body had not caught Dilir, or he would certainly have been crushed internally, but he was held by sufficient of it for the moment to keep him helpless with only his head and chest and left arm free. He had no weapon in that hand that he could get at or use, and his vigorous smack on that part of the camel's knotted hair which was nearest him made no more impression than if a fly had alighted.

Nafcesa picked herself up and looked round wondering. Then flinging back the dirty black shawl to which she ever clung, she ran to the mountainous heaving body to investigate.

Dilir's turban had fallen off and rolled wide, revealing his smooth close-cropped dark head, the sight of which for some reason seemed to goad Nafcesa to rage. The fall had scattered many small things he had been carrying far and wide, and among them the tin box of flint and tinder, which had bounced from his pocket. Seizing upon it the girl felt the sharp edge against her finger, and with murder in her eyes approached the man. He watched her calmly. He saw her intention quite clearly, and knew that argument was useless. In many things she was just a savage, and for the moment was as much beyond reason as a maniac. Death in itself he feared not at all. He had lived with it stalking close beside him as a familiar companion for many years, but death by the hand of a woman made his teeth grit. He could have warded her off for a while with his left arm by an undignified scuffle, but that was not his way; he possessed to the full the pride of his race, "an Afghan pride nor Hell nor Heaven can bind." Little fool! If she did for him, she herself would never then reach safety.

Beneath his saffron-coloured nomad robe he wore his khaki-coloured shirt and breeches, and his shirt-sleeves were neatly rolled up to the shoulder, in order not to show when he extended his arms from the Arab wrappings, so the left arm, lying on the sand, palm uppermost, was bare. As Nafeesa, crouching low, crept toward him with red fury in her eyes, he made one more intense struggle to get free, feeling his muscles crack with the effort and as if his body would part in two, but without being able to draw himself out an inch from under the dead weight that pinned him down. If she really was going to do it he hoped she would strike hard and deep, as a man would have done, but it was not in his nature to say a word, so he lay and smiled slightly at her. That disconcerted her, and she stopped in her curious creeping process, squatting like a bird of prey a few yards off. Then a new idea seized her, a nasty vicious thought. She gripped the man's brown fingers outspread on the sand, and slowly, slowly, with infinite malice, watching his face meantime, she drew the tin-edge in a jagged bloody line along the centre of the arm from shoulder to wrist.

Dilir was too proud to flinch or try to draw away; his face never even changed; he merely watched her with intense interest and with the same little half-questioning smile on his lips.

As she neared the wrist the camel gave a great heave. The girl flung the tin box from her, and with a cry of terror bounced as far off as possible just as Dilir gathered his legs from under and leapt to his feet. Nafeesa darted to the other side of the animal and, flinging her dust-stained clout across her head and face, began rocking herself to and fro.

Dilir shook the trickling blood from his arm, and bent over to examine the camel. As he had expected, one of its forelegs was broken. It must be killed, worse luck! It would have seemed to him a most extravagant notion to waste a good bullet on it, so he drew out the sharp sheath knife he always carried, and holding up the long neck severed the throat in one swift gash, and as it sank gurgling on the sand he turned to deal with Nafeesa.

Never in his life had he so intensely admired a woman! There had been episodes in his career, of course; some mild girl-children had at times touched his fancy as admirable, and there was once a chattering shrew who for a while had attracted him, but they had passed and gone, leaving no trace. Here indeed was a woman transcendently above all women in courage and daring! A daughter of the English, but one of red blood and ways he understood. One who could appreciate and share his joy in high adventure! He had lived long enough with the English to have gained some insight into their idea of comradeship in marriage, but he had never dared to hope it might come his way, for the women of his race did not understand it and were not fit for it. That she had attacked him when he was lying helpless troubled him not at all; the main point was that she had carried out her brutal drama and had not been appalled when she saw the result of her action. For the first time in his life the wild joy of playing on woman's feelings and hurting her ran like fire in his blood. So he advanced toward her, a terrifying figure enough, with stains on his soiled flowing robe and the great knife, gory from the camel, in his hand.

In spite of her veiled head Nafeesa had a peep-hole and could see him well enough; he knew that. As he drew near she moaned and bowed herself.

"Fling back thy head-cloth," commanded Dilir in the Bisharein tongue, very sternly, and as she did not immediately comply he repeated his command in the most threatening tone he knew how to use.

She obeyed, and revealing her face, knelt before him upright on the sand, and he saw she had not shed a tear, for her light-blue eyes, shining forth strangely from the sun-darkened skin, met his without a quiver.

He showed her the tin box which he had picked up.

"What dost thou now deserve that I do to thee, woman?" he demanded.

She made a sorrowful motion of the head. "I am in thy hands; do with me as thou wilt," she replied.

He sat down in front of her, and taking one of the honey-warm arms across his knees, pulled her forward a little roughly, and as he ran his fingers over the finely moulded flesh he felt her quiver in anticipation. With difficulty he restrained himself from laughing aloud in the new ecstasy of his own sensations. This woman he would have for himself even if it meant cutting adrift from all his old life and carrying her off with him for a vagabond career in his native mountains!

He laid the edge of the knife against her skin, and said brutally: "Make ready, for I can cut sharper and deeper than thou."

He expected she would faint, but she did not, though her whole body gave a little spasmodic twitch away. She did not say anything—as proud

as he, it was not in her to cry for mercy. He looked up to find her gazing straight at him, and though there was a kind of dull terror in her eyes there was anger too. In spite of himself a gleam came into his own eyes and his lips curved a little.

"Ask mercy and I will give it thee."

In answer she smiled suddenly, a smile which flooded over his whole being, rousing him to a height of joy he had never previously experienced; then gripping him by the shoulder with her free hand she cried suddenly, "I fear thee not, thou strange fierce man!"

Then his arms were round her, and their faces pressed against each other, but remembering, even in his emotion, that she was a daughter of the English, and had the birth-right of free choice, he asked with a tenderness no one could have dreamed him capable of, "Wilt thou come with me and be my mate, oh thou littlest wild hawk of the desert?"

Fearlessly she assented, her arms round his lined and sinewy neck. So they sat awhile.

Suddenly Dilir came to himself out of his dream of Paradise, and shading his eyes with his hand he looked all round the desert. Then standing up on the top of the dead camel to get a better sweep he repeated the process.

Afar off he saw a speck descending in the blue and purple distance ahead of them. "Aha," he cried, "maybe there is one of our party there who needs us!"

There was obviously no time to lose and much to do. So he tore strips from the native garment he was about to discard, and made Nafeesa tie them tightly about his wounded arm, trying to shame her by gazing hard into her eyes while she

did it, but without the least result. Luckily the wound was not much more than skin deep, and though painful did not seem dangerous, as no vital artery had been severed. "No thanks to thee; thanks rather to the camel who rose at the dangerous moment, thou bloodthirsty little witch," said Dilir composedly.

This business finished, he reluctantly discarded his sandals, replacing them by the boots and leggings, which he had carried on the camel. When he had slipped into his thin short coat and replaced the turban by his sun-helmet, he looked once more as if he belonged to civilisation.

He gave considerable thought to the question of what to take and what to leave, for it was not much they could bear afoot, even though he had the full intention of making Nafeesa carry her share. The rifle, revolver and ammunition were essential. The water-skin, still half-full, came next; a handful of coffee-beans with a pan to boil them in, and some maize, provided what was necessary in the way of food, and the brown cloak, indispensable for the chills of evening, could not be left behind. These, with a few odds and ends Dilir carried in his pockets, such as some native tobacco and a stick for lighting fires, were about all they could manage. He made a separate packet of the maize and beans, and with a true Bedouin gesture waved to her to pick it up. She looked at him sorrowfully. "But first," she expostulated, "we must eat the camel's liver." Dilir looked regretfully at the dead camel. "I would do so indeed," he replied, "but there is no time—one of our party may be lying there with the rakhan (carrion eagles) descending upon him."

"It is a great pity to waste so much good food," persisted Nafeesa. "Sometimes I have eaten it raw; it will not take a minute."

Dilir looked at her with a keen twinkle in his dark eyes. "And thou art English wholly!" he said chaffingly. Nevertheless he bent down and with his long knife cut out neatly a great piece of the liver, then sliced it into strips as if he had been a butcher by trade, finally stringing the strips together on the top of his pack. "It will dry in the sun as we walk," he remarked.

He considered a moment the advisability of going further and opening the camel's stomach to get the water it would contain, water which remains fresh, though vapid and with a slightly bluish tinge, after some days. He decided against it. The girbies he had managed to replenish from the wells at Terfaui, but the camels had not drunk there, and the water remaining in the body could be but small in quantity.

"I will not be English if I may not eat good things," said Nafeesa as they finally set out together. "It is the truth then what that fair English boy said—he is of my *beyt*, I am of his father and of his mother?"

"It is so. I told you it was. You have known always that you are English, is it not so? You were born of an English mother, the wife of an officer at Halfa; they were both carried away in a raid and the man was slain."

Nafeesa nodded as she padded along barefoot beside his sturdy booted stride. "This ring was my mother's; it is all I have."

He examined it and found the word "Pansy" engraved inside.

"Paansee," she said, imitating him as he pro-

nounced it aloud. "I can speak some English. I learnt it from a man of the Hamedomerab who did business with the Mallak."

Then as she took the ring back from him, she went on, "Strange man, who art not of the English nor yet of the Bisharein, but lookest like both and speakest all tongues, wilt thou teach me the language of my fathers?"

"I will teach thee both the language and the customs," he said, laughing. "First then, among the English the man bears all the burdens while the woman steps free."

"That I would not," replied Nafeesa quickly, steadying the weight on her head. "I am strong and can carry much."

"Ay, thou art strong. Wilt go back to thine old husband?"

She turned and gave him a side-long glance that spoke more eloquently than words!

Dilir was well content.

"Hast any children?" he asked presently.

"Never a child."

"It is well," he said soberly.

So they plodded on over the waste of sand, and he would not let her walk behind him as she wished, but made her come alongside according to the "English custom," so that they could talk as they journeyed.

Hour after hour they went on, resting only once for a while to drink and eat a little of the maize. He would not let her touch the liver yet, saying it would make her thirsty. The shadows had begun to creep across the flushed sky before they found that for which Dilir searched, a strange humped figure on the sand, which had drifted already like a blanket over the still outline.

Several small "eagles" fluttered a little farther back as the pair drew near, and by their testimony Dilir knew that life was not extinct, for the carrion bird makes no mistakes.

Flinging his burden down he knelt beside the hump in the sand, and turning the figure over disclosed the purple swollen face of Edgar Pentland. He opened the shirt and slipped his hand inside, and then taking a little of the precious water in the hollow of his hand passed it across the man's lips and moistened his mouth inside.

"He lives!" he announced.

Nafeesa flopped down beside him, and, apparently quite fresh in spite of her arduous night and day, began a slow process of massage, kneading and swaying and crooning to herself as she did so.

Dilir left her to it and set about his preparations for the night. First he scooped a hollow in the sand as a protection against the wind, which, however, was hardly felt this evening; in so doing turned up some "jella" or dried camel droppings, which he set aside with a grunt of satisfaction. When he had made his hollow sufficiently large to be a sort of one-sided nest for the three of them, he built a fire, whittling away the bit of dried stick he had carefully transferred to his pocket from his saddle-bags, and nursing the baby flame tenderly.

He had only just arranged things to his liking and got a good glow when Pentland began to breathe heavily, choked, rose on his elbow and fell back. Instantly Dilir was beside him with more water, and when he had swallowed it, he dragged him into the hollow and set him up leaning against the sandy slope. Then heeding him no more he

and Nafeesa set to like wolves on to raw maize and sun-dried camel's liver, which neither of them considered needed any further cooking. When they had finished Nafeesa ground the already roasted berries, crushing them in the little tin pan with the butt of the revolver, and they boiled their coffee on the glowing embers. Neither of them troubled their heads further about Pentland; they had done what they could and it was for him to do the rest. If he made some effort and came alive again, well and good; if not, why waste more water on him?

The air was sharp, with a regular winding sheet of white mist, reflecting a ghostly light from the moon, but there was practically no wind. Dilir threw his cloak over Nafeesa and drew her into the hollow of his right arm, leaving the left arm, which ached and throbbed, free.

Never could he have believed that his tremendous vitality could be so heightened to a measure of undreamed-of bliss! Never had he conceived that a woman could be more to him than a momentary toy! With the intensifying of sensation and the arousing of the fiercest master-passion of all, the years of his training dropped from him, and he became more and more primitive man. There surged through his mind bewildering memories of his own wild country. Adown the aisles of his mind came ringing old tribal songs of love and hate which he had heard as a boy around camp fires, and had then found meaningless. Presently he began to chant in a low crooning tone in Pushtu, and on and on he swept, improvising as he went, with rising and falling cadences. The girl, who understood not one syllable of the language, lost no tone of the meaning, and listened entranced as

he fired her with vague thoughts of a grand tenderness which enfolded her, of a firm grip that held her, of a desperate courage in her defence, and a wild defiance to the world outside, while she nestled snug within the fortress of his heart. She gripped his shirt in her two hands, holding on with a kind of impetuosity, wholly involuntary, until all at once he ceased, and looking down at her in the firelight with flashing dark eyes, showered his love upon her in his glance. She sighed in an ecstasy of joy. He turned her face up a little, touching the tiny stud in the nostril, laughing gently meantime, and letting his horny hand move softly over her smooth cheek.

"Littlest one, thou art mine," he said at last in English. "And my heart swells large as the world for thee; from afar I came and found thee to bring thee to mine heart, and so will I hold thee to me for ever."

This was about as intelligible to Nafeesa as the Pushtu, but she caught one word she knew, and answered in English too.

"No 'little'—big, big as man."

He laughed, mimicking her. "Big, art thou? Must learn to speak English, thou daughter of the English. Art safe with me. Hast naught to fear. I will carry thee to Assuan, and we will be wed English fashion."

This he had to translate.

"My husband?" Nafeesa objected.

"He is nought."

"The English boy, what will he say?"

"But what matter what he will say? In all the world I hold thee to me by mine own strength."

Neither of them gave a single thought to their

dangerous position, surrounded by enemies, deprived of all but a drop of foul water, and lying in a wilderness of sand. To Nafeesa the desert was home; she pictured no other existence. She had never been in a town in her life. To the Pathan the moment was so absolutely all-sufficing that if he had to die the next, it would seem hardly a matter to consider. So they slept like two children without keeping watch, at peace and utterly careless.

But with the earliest break of day Dilir's alert mind had swung into its natural beat, and he was considering the position from all points. For himself and Nafeesa he had no fear. They had a cupful of water apiece left, and enough food for one or possibly two days. They could make their way on foot to that trysting place at Telat Abda, where they might find the others. But with Pentland it was a different matter. Had he died in the night and saved them the responsibility? Dilir stepped over to him and found him sleeping, unnaturally and uneasily, but still sleeping, and not unconscious.

"I had hoped to find him dead," he said candidly to Nafeesa, who sat up the instant he moved. "We cannot take him with us, and to leave him here were a hard thing to explain to the Bimbashi, though verily I think the heart of the Bimbashi would be with us in this matter."

As he spoke, Nafeesa, yawning, stretched herself and mounted to the top of the little sand-heap. "There is one who comes," she cried, pointing out ahead into the desert.

Dilir was beside her in an instant. "It is a man on a camel," he said. "And I can see camel tracks leading from us to him, which were not

visible in the night. He rides uneasily; it is a European," he went on. Then after a few more minutes of intense scrutiny, "It is the Bimbashi," he cried joyously.

Durham was evidently making back on his tracks of the night before, as Dilir had keenly discerned in the first glance, for he came on steadily, and as he drew nearer they saw that his face was very grave and worn and haggard. Even before he made his camel kneel to alight, he cried out to know which of them were there, in the vain hope that the woman whom his heart sought might be safe.

Dilir saluted and sprang forward to help him down, and then noticed that his right leg was stiff and that he limped heavily when he tried to walk on it. His quick apprehension told him at once who it was that Durham looked for, and he recounted the tale of his own adventures, knowing exactly what was in his friend's heart, as he supported him to the hollow.

Nafeesa stood a little apart from them, her miserable garment, a foot deep in accumulated dust, draggled around her feet; her head-covering she had thrown aside, and her curious hair was tortured in innumerable tiny pigtails darkened with oil. Yet she had a wild fire in her eyes and a grace in her carriage that drew attention.

Recovering himself after the first moment of sick disappointment, Durham stepped up to her, saluting, and holding out his hand he said cordially, "We owe everything to your courage."

She understood he was praising her and smiled, showing her splendid teeth, and saying something quickly to Dilir in Bisharein. Durham understood it well enough; she had told the Pathan to say,

" how it was with them, and that she was going to be his woman." Dilir, however, merely looked at her and exclaimed severely, " Peace ! " and Durham, realising the extraordinary complications of any such affair, discreetly pretended not to understand, and passed over to look at Pentland.

" He fell off," he explained, " and I was faint from loss of blood and did not know it. If it had not been for this fine *naga* (she-camel) I should have been dead. For she carried me on a long way, and when she stopped I fell off. I came to myself in the night, and found I still had the camel-rope round my hand and she was patiently standing by me, so I was able to milk her into my helmet, and that put new life into me. Directly the morning gave me light enough I picked up my tracks again to find Pentland."

Dilir smiled, pleased. " 'Tis a grand beast, cost a great deal," he explained. He was going to add he had purposely procured one in milk for the use of Mrs. Pentland, who had unfortunately gone off with Maurice on an inferior beast, but he checked himself, and instead insisted on examining Durham's leg.

A bullet had drilled a hole through the fleshy part of the calf, but it had been bandaged efficiently, and would probably heal in the clean desert air without any great harm being done.

The *naga* had still a little milk left, and after the other two had had a short drink Nafeesa carried some over in the little tin pan to Edgar Pentland, who sat up suddenly, a frazzled figure, and snatched it from her. When he had absorbed it, he began to talk, very much as usual, and seemed extraordinarily little the worse for the heat apoplexy

which had felled him to the ground in a fit of dizziness.

So they held a council, sitting there together, the four of them, with one obedient fine camel—five specks in the burnished arc of the great plain.

CHAPTER XI

MAURICE ON HIS METAL

MAURICE had been very loath to leave the scene of the fighting, but he had sense enough to realise that in being entrusted with Iona he was being given the highest charge.

"They will follow at once," he assured her, making the camel hasten onward, and thanking his stars he had had the curiosity to learn the elements of camel-management.

In a surprisingly short time they were swallowed up in the immensity of space and had lost all touch with what lay behind. The moonlight was diffused in a diaphanous sparkling sheet near the ground, and up to twenty or thirty feet above it, and then the veil of clammy mist ended apparently, for the brilliant stars could be seen. Through this filmy veil they pressed onward for an hour or more, and then Maurice stopped the camel and listened. His heart was high. For the first time in his life he had touched reality, and the contact was intoxicating. The bracing call of responsibility had come to him, and every nerve in his body tingled in response. It was as if he had drunk a draught of pure oxygen. He understood now the joyous aspect of Dilir, to whom life was one wild adventure. Phrases came leap-

ing into his thoughts, and he suddenly laughed aloud joyously.

"Maurice!" exclaimed Iona, astonished.

"I was thinking of Dilir," he explained, "the 'invincible boy'! Do you know that 'Dilir' means 'courageous'? Nothing could suit him better, unless it's the Hawk; he has the inhuman swiftness of a bird of prey!"

But she had not risen to his mood. "I wish we could hear them," she said, listening intently. "Shall we call?"

"No use! It's all right. I've got to take you to a place called Telat Abda, a day's journey. I know all about it." In his present mood he was feeling that for the first time he knew what it was to be "master of his circumstances," yet for several years he had been his own master, had ordered people about and followed his inclinations.

"Did you see Edgar join them?" Iona asked as the camel began to move forward again.

"Yes," he lied cheerfully. "Just as we left. He's safe enough with two men like that to look after him."

He studied the compass, which he could see quite well in the odd diffused light about them. "Ship of the desert and I'm at the helm. Meaningless phrase altogether to me before, the hundreds of times I've heard it! Must live a thing to know it; seem to have been living in a kind of cardboard world up to now."

"I feel as if it were the cardboard world I'd got into," replied Iona unsympathetically. Yet she was not unhappy. How could she be when she was living in a vision of some safe snug haven just out of sight over the horizon, where Durnam and the others would presently join them, and

well equipped they would jog homeward? But her mind refused to get beyond the homeward journey. Passionately she was clutching at what remained of the greatest happiness she had ever known. It had begun when Durham was tied to the tree, and those curious large eyes instead of looking through her had looked at her, focused upon her soul. Each time since that their eyes had met he had seen her, and the well-spring of gladness had bounded in her afresh. As they seemed to swim through the silver billows of the mist, her mind ran on Durham, and she recalled a phrase Maurice had used about him. "You can't help loving him," he had cried one morning, "there's such an elemental simplicity about him!"

He had given her the key-word, simplicity, that was it. He was not one of the strong silent men of fiction, with fires of romance and feeling and passion rigidly repressed beneath a calm exterior. He was just a simple human-hearted lovable very inarticulate man, so perfectly natural that other people, who were sheathed in cloaks of convention, could not understand him, and credited him with a great deal that was not there. His long silences were not the result of stern and conscious holding aloof, but merely because he had never learned to speak when he had nothing to say. His sharp sentences of censure were not cruel, as they were sometimes called, but the truth of the matter as he saw it without softening dressings. It seemed to Iona that though she had always been called natural by those who loved her, that even she herself was grossly artificial in comparison; *her* softening cloak was a fear of hurting people's feelings and a desire to avoid unpleasantness, so she had often perjured herself

and left the lines of real simplicity. What a relief to fling all that aside and be oneself! Having met him and learned how it might be done, she felt that in future she might do it too, and therein win to a small measure of freedom, even if she had to continue her caged life.

There was one of the rough brown cloaks across the camel, and presently Maurice unwound it and threw it round her as he felt her shiver in the bitter night air. She thanked him, adding softly, "It's as if we moved forward always in the heart of an unsolidified pearl which goes continually with us."

"Are you very tired?"

"Yes, rather."

"We ought to rest I think, and then get on while the coolness of the night lasts."

He made the camel kneel down, and examined the baggage it carried. There was no saddle, but a native-made pad sufficient for the two of them to sit together. To it were fastened a water-skin and a bag containing meal and dates. There was also a revolver and ammunition, as the pistol he had previously been using came from the camel Durham had now got. Neither of them were hungry, so they drank a little water and then sat huddled together on the lee side of the grumbling camel.

"He won't kick?" Iona had asked apprehensively and, with the air of a man accustomed to camels from his babyhood, he had reassured her.

They talked a little spasmodically, and presently Maurice asked abruptly, "What are you going to do about it all, Iona?"

She did not pretend to misunderstand, but put

her hand on his with a little expressive gesture. "I daren't think," she said. "Not beyond the wells, not beyond that."

"It's hard luck on you that it should have happened so; that's the way things do happen—that's life. I'm not fretting about the Chief—he'll take it standing up, however bitter it is."

"And I, being a woman and therefore a coward, I suppose?" she asked gibingly, "will display my wounds for all the world to see?"

"It's different for you, much harder." He did not say how, but she knew. She it was who was tied to a corpse while Durham at least was free and could go alone into the wild places of the earth to find solace. Yet whatever happened they both had this, they had met, and without the aid of words had understood; from that wonderful contact their hearts were raised and their lives enriched, miracle that it was! But how long would that last through the barren years when the understanding could no more be renewed, and the electric current was isolated?

Dawn found them wearily jogging along in a rolling wilderness, no longer merely sand, but broken by lumps of rock here and there, and as the bellying sail of colour betokening sunrise floated out overhead, they discerned afar off grey shapes that might be hills. Maurice had long since made the discovery that having set the camel's nose toward the particular point of the compass desired, it went on in that direction unswervingly without the necessity for guidance. Once more they halted for an hour's rest, and this time ate a few of the dates. Hardly had they started again than Maurice saw something ahead which disquieted him. And he stopped the camel.

"Look there, straight in front of us—what do you make out?" he asked.

"It is a man on a camel," Iona declared. "Standing still." Without dismounting Maurice examined the pistol and placed it ready in his coat pocket. They waited as they were for a quarter of an hour, but the distant figure never moved that they could see.

"I'm blowed if I know what to do," burst out the youthful leader, relapsing from dignity to slang as the romantic influence of the moonlight left him. "He is standing exactly where we want to go, and in a flat place like this it's no use skirting round. He must have seen us, anyway. We must go on, for if we wait much longer it will get too hot to travel."

"Go on," echoed Iona.

"If you're for it, I am."

So the camel's long loping strides once more devoured the ground. Nearer and nearer they came, and still the man did not move. He was sitting end on, but whether facing toward or away from them they could not tell. It was incredible in either case that he had not seen them; no desert-dweller would sit for hours thus exposed without sweeping the horizon for possible enemies.

"I believe it's Lot's Wife," suggested Maurice, "and we've mistaken the locality where it happened. What a discovery! Look, there are queer patches, white like salt, all about on the ground!"

Their hearts beat harder and harder the nearer they approached, for the tall rider seemed to grow to gigantic proportions. Then all at once Maurice burst out into a laugh of relief. "I'm right," he cried. "It's a statue or pillar of some sort. Huge. Cut out of rock."

"Why, so it is!"

They came up from an angle and perceived that what had so alarmed them was a sharp isolated black rock, rising sheer from the sand to the height of twenty feet, and seen sideways it had not the length of a camel's body, and lost all resemblance to a beast and its rider, so that they wondered they could ever have been so befooled. Yet they were not the only ones, for that rock is known far and wide among the nomad tribes as "Okam ama," the "camel-rider," or, literally, the "camel to ride."

The hills in the distance had loomed more and more distinct while their thoughts were occupied by the grotesque rock, but yet they had far to go before reaching them. Iona was overcome with sleep, so that she drooped forward again and again, and only saved herself by a jerk from falling on to the camel's neck. Maurice put his arm round her, but he was in no better case himself, and it was a very white and haggard-faced boy he looked. They passed from the sand on to a shining plain of pure white where the patches they already noticed coalesced into a complete carpet, and the camel very much objected to the new conditions. Several times it stopped when its feet broke through the thin crust, and at last it began to limp. Maurice got down to lead it, feeling very stiff himself. He put his finger down to taste the white coating, but found it was not salt.

Hour after hour he trudged on, his eyes smarting with the glare, and his face flayed with the acrid particles in the air. Only when he glanced up and saw Iona pathetically huddled up, with the cloak over her head and shoulders to keep off the

pitiless light and heat, he gained fresh resolution and courage to play his part as a man should do.

At long last they were in the neighbourhood of the rocks and low hills, and passed straight on into a narrow gully between two not very high hills where they saw some trees and green stuff. Maurice's lips were so cracked, and his tongue so furred and swollen, that when he tried to arouse his companion to look up he found he could not speak. She was in better case than he, however, because she had kept her face covered, and when she came to herself at his prompting she exclaimed with pleasure, "Why, this must be the very place! How clever of you!" She scrambled down and walked beside him over the stony entrance, but in both of their hearts was wonder, for they saw no sign of water or human beings, and they had hoped the others of the party, knowing the way better, might have been here first. The camel presently took the matter into its own power, for it broke away from Maurice and with outstretched neck, stiff as a pole, stumbled onward over the loose stones into the ravine.

"It smells water," cried Maurice eagerly, and they hastened after it, and found it far down in the wady in an open space beside a well shaded by a large sayal tree. The ground around was muddy and trampled; evidently some large flock of animals had very recently quenched their thirst here and departed. The camel was licking the leathern bucket attached to the side of the well, and pawing excitedly.

Maurice pushed it off and let down the bucket to the full reach of the rope, but when he drew it up, though the camel nearly knocked him over in its eagerness, there was no water in it.

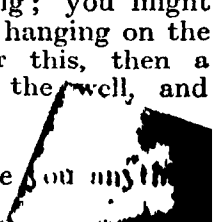
"Bad look-out," he commented. "Well empty. We have a little for ourselves in the skin still." So they drank a few mouthfuls, exercising great self-restraint, before he attempted once more to get some from the well.

Leaning over and peering down he could see nothing, so he told Iona he meant to climb down, and throwing off his light coat he first let the bucket go and then followed, climbing down the inside by placing fingers and toes in the crevices of the rough sides. "It's not difficult," he called up, "only a bit slippy," and then Iona heard his voice coming up to her as the voice of a man from the grave.

"I'm on the bottom; it's about fifteen feet deep, and very wet, but no actual water. I think by scooping up the mud I can get some."

So he worked patiently away in the soft mud with his hands, and waited until the water filtered into the hole he had made.

"I've nothing to scoop it up in," he called out presently. "The bucket is too big; you might throw down that tin cup that was hanging on the camel." There was silence after this, then a scrimmage round the mouth of the well, and lastly Iona's voice very solemn:



"The camel won't let me."

"Oh, the jargoned beast! Have you anything else?"

"There's only your sun-helmet here."

"Send it along. Jolly nice it will look afterwards, won't it?"

The sun-helmet came hurtling down, and little by little Maurice filled the bucket. Then he scrambled up again, and pulled it out. He tasted the water and spat it out promptly. "Beastly!"

he exclaimed, but the camel, to whom they gave it all, by pouring it into a sort of clay trough by the side of the well, apparently found it anything but beastly. He became marvellously good, and knelt like a lamb while they finished unloading him. Maurice hobbled his forelegs the way he had seen the natives do, and let him loose to browse among the bushes. "Good job he knows how to pick up a living," he said; "more than I should do with the means at his disposal."

He found that Iona had fallen fast asleep just as she was under the shadow of a clump of thundub, utterly worn out, so he too, without more ado, lay down beside her and followed her example.

It was evening before he awoke, and looking at his watch he found that the hands indicated six o'clock. His heart gave a leap of uneasiness. The evening of the first day and no sign of the others?

Iona was still sound asleep. Maurice himself felt greatly refreshed and exceedingly hungry. He was covered with mud from the well, and knew himself to be an awful object, but the first thing obviously was to get a fire going and try to prepare some food. Once again the spirit of adventure was rampant in him; no matter what happened subsequently he held the moment in his hand. He was delighted to discover that in him too was a fibre of the pith that animated Dilir and his kind.

The water-skin showed about a pint of very doubtful water; still, for making coffee it was better than that nauseous stuff from the well. In the saddle-bag was one of the small tin pans for coffee-making, together with coffee beans and a

little salt, beside the meal and dates. Maurice himself had one or two matches left, which was fortunate, as he did not know how to use the flint and tinder packed inside the pan. He stumbled about in the fast fading light, until he struck a biggish boulder a little way up the hill, not too near the well, and on the lee side of this he constructed a fire, finding plenty of material in the bushes around, which were quite dry and caught easily, some of the dry halfa grass taking the place of paper. When he fairly got a blaze going he felt prouder than he had been about any of his own achievements for a long time. He was vigorously piling on fuel when Iona appeared round the corner. "Oh!" she cried, still half-dazed, then sharply, "Are they here?"

"Not yet, but will be. I've made a fire. Jolly clever that! Bet you couldn't. There's coffee, it's great. Think we could do anything with that meal?"

She could and did, entering into the spirit of the game. Not for nothing had she watched the women in the huts. All she needed was water. Maurice hied to the well and found the water in the bottom had dribbled in to the extent of an inch or two, so he climbed down once more and filled the bucket as before, but more easily. Detaching it from the handle, he gave the camel another allowance, and carried the rest up to the boulder. Iona made her flat cakes and left them to bake, and with the rest of the meal soon had a very thick porridge ready. They supped heartily and finished up with the coffee. Far-seeing Iona filled the pan once more with water, and put some of the maize from their pockets into

it, to simmer slowly for next morning. In blissful content they leaned against the rock, well-filled and warm. The only thing Maurice regretted was that he had no tobacco.

Iona was the first to awake in the morning, after an excellent night's rest, and as she stared up the valley she rubbed her eyes in amazement, looked away and looked again. Through the scanty setting of the trees the earth seemed made of jewels! She saw rocks thrusting up their heads of every imaginable colour—bright purple, crimson, chrome yellow and saffron. She sprang to her feet to investigate the phenomenon, and Maurice, hearing, joined her.

"Weird!" he echoed, as excited as she. "I should think it was! Outdoes Sindbad the Sailor altogether. Where's that swanky camel of mine? I see he's trying to glean sustenance from some dead-looking stuff, while away up there are bushes that out-emerald emerald. Let's take him up."

He caught the camel without difficulty and led him along.

On the way they stopped and examined the rocks, and chipped little bits off them, with the result that they lost all their brilliance and lay lifeless until they were held up to the sun. "It's the sun that does it," Iona exclaimed. "The sun is shining straight down the valley and catches them, whereas when we came yesterday it was across. I believe it's porphyry; I've seen some just like this."

"Porphyry is red; that doesn't account for the yellows; there must be lots of other things," Maurice averred. He tugged his reluctant camel by the halter up the hill, and was greatly disgusted to find it would not touch the very green bushes,

and when released slithered back again in its ungainly way and resumed its more congenial occupation of licking what looked like bare thorny twigs, and though its flaggy lips actually bled from the piercing of the sharp spines, that affected it not at all.

Maurice had found what interested him still more, a sort of low bush covered with very small dry gourds, and he began pelting Iona with them with such accuracy that she glanced up, shaking her fist at him threateningly, and then suddenly burst out laughing.

"If you only knew what a scarecrow you look! So different from the spruce polished boy at the Cataract Hotel—I couldn't have believed it." The laugh broke off in her throat, and she turned involuntarily to the end of the wady in the wistful hope of seeing someone appear.

"Not much better yourself," he assured her in his schoolboy way, so they returned to get some water and have a good clean up. Iona disappeared with half-a-bucket full and did wonders, and then Maurice marched off down to the well, followed by the camel, whose appetite for water was insatiable. When he had quieted it, he scraped and cleaned himself, and producing his pocket razor and the infinitesimal fragment of soap which never left him, he made himself so presentable that Iona laughed with pleasure at seeing him. She had grown to love him with a deep affection, as if he were indeed a younger brother.

She had prepared the breakfast—cold maize porridge and two crisp flat cakes left over from last night's baking, with a handful of dates.

"I'll fill our water-skin from the well now in case of emergencies," Maurice said when they

had finished, and then he pulled himself up abruptly in an attitude of attention and held up his hand, for from the well, lying below and hidden from them, came a multitude of strange noises and the gurgling of camels.

Very cautiously Maurice peeped round the corner, while Iona's heart almost stopped in the exceeding anxiety to know if it were their own party, who had found them. There was no need to speak, the look on Maurice's face undeceived her. "It's natives," he said below his breath, drawing back beside her.

Iona went very white. All at once she realised the position of extreme peril they were in. These wild tribes of nomads might be friendly enough, but they might be utterly irresponsible.

"Are they armed men or with flocks?" she asked breathlessly, and he went down on hands and knees and crept round the rock so that he could peer down without being seen. "There are a lot of men and camels; I don't see any sheep and goats. They have spears. They may be the Koatil, but I couldn't tell the difference if they weren't. I don't see anything like Thies there."

Then after a few minutes: "One of them has caught our camel and is bringing it in. They've unhobbled it and are examining its feet. They know it's lame all right. They are looking about. What shall we do, Iona? Shall I shoot if they come up here?"

"Better not," she counselled wisely. "They would only kill us both. Let us hide."

He glanced around. The huge boulder was split, and in the crevice between the fragments was a place large enough for them both to squeeze into. Iona went first, thrusting herself as far

back as possible. Maurice gathered up all the stray possessions, and pushed them in after her. Then he followed and crouched down in such a constricted position that he felt his ribs were being pressed in on his lungs. Unless anyone came straight in front of the crack and peered in they could not be seen. But he knew little of the ways of the nomads to think that such a simple device would deceive them. A small posse of the new-comers walked straight up to the boulder, following the marks as clearly as an educated man would follow the directions from a book. Without an instant's hesitation they rounded the corner, and made several guttural grunts, pointing to the place where the fire had been. Then their wild faces and gleaming teeth appeared radiant with a kind of surprised delight at the mouth of the crack. What had they got hold of? With their long spear-heads they made as if to thrust into Maurice then and there, grinning with glee.

He held up his hand, signalling that he would come out, whereupon one seized him by the arm and wrenched him forth so roughly that Maurice felt as if he had been torn in two, and frightfully bruised he was flung on the ground, while eager hands raked the stuff out behind him. There was an outburst of grunts, and then a surprised silence as Iona was discovered, her fair skin shining up out of the dark hole. She worked her way forward herself, and they did not lay hands on her, as Maurice, who was now clawed by the back of his neck in a vice-like grip, expected they would do. She stepped out and shook her skirts out, looking round about her with the calm dignity of a queen, though her face had lost every spot of colour.

Maurice groaned in spirit; he, her protector, was of no more use than a wretched puppy in the hands of his captors; all his high imaginings and brave defiance of circumstances had evaporated into the void.

CHAPTER XII

THE GLORY OF LOVE

THE council was up.

Dilir had risen and was standing beside Nafeesa.

"What lies out there?" he asked her, indicating the huge space to the East.

"Meshushenai well," she answered without hesitation. "Good well, sweet water, but deep, belongs to the Koatil."

"How far?"

"Perhaps three days."

"It doesn't belong to your tribe, the Mallak?"

She shook her head and indicated a direction much more to the north. "Mallak there, Eigat——"

"Yes, I know; we may come across some of them."

"The Mallak belong also to the Aliab branch of the Koatil?" queried Durham in the voice of one who states a fact rather than asks for information.

"Yes," assented Dilir. "Koatil and Mallak are both sub-tribes of the Aliab, all Bisharein. The Mallak are nomads and visit the Koatil at Terfaui, luckily for us." Then he turned again to Nafeesa. "And there?" he asked, sweeping his arm to the left, almost due westward.

Nafeesa stepped forward a pace or two, sniffing

as if she judged locality by the sense of smell. "Telat Abda there," she said, "Adoliab tribe."

"How far are we from it?"

She hesitated. "Nafeesa not been there—perhaps three hours. Adoliab fight with Aliab at well always—bad men Adoliab." She worked herself up with a kind of frenzied excitement, and with sparkling eyes and wild gestures, poured out a flood of tangled stuff about various wells and quarrels and bloodshed and triumphs, so fast that even Dilir could not follow her; her voice grew shriller and shriller.

"Peace!" he exclaimed authoritatively, and she stopped as if an electric switch had been cut off.

"Only three hours!" said Durham. "That was the meeting-place. They will be there. Maurice is inexperienced, but he is the right sort. Let us start."

Already Dilir was packing their small belongings upon the only camel; when he had finished he spoke:

"If you will ride, sir, with Mr. Pentland, the girl and I will walk."

Durham smiled grimly; it did not strike him as at all a suitable arrangement, but then there was his detestable leg, which was not easy to forget.

Nafeesa was quite at one with Dilir. "Walk, me," she said in English. "He my man," and sidled up to Dilir, who sent her a spark of amusement from his merry eyes.

Durham grinned. "You seem to be in for it, Hawk," he chuckled. "But it can't be settled off-hand like that. There are obstacles. An inconvenient Bisharein husband; young Temple

will have something to say. In his absence I must forbid the banns until we are upon surer ground."

Dilir saluted.

"Do you know I am your cousin, Miss Temple—Nafeesa?" Durham continued.

"Cousin, coosin," she echoed, mouthing the word. "What?"

"Durao," translated Dilir. Then to Durham, "No fear, sir, she is safe with me as my own sister until we reach civilisation. She is as strong as I am. Let her walk. Remember your leg."

In fact, Durham reeled as he tried to stand on it. "You have me for the present," he answered; "we will start so, anyway; I give in, and she must ride later in her turn."

Edgar, who had no intention of being left behind, had already seated himself in the foremost place on the pad, and so they started.

The sun was very high in the heavens when they came to the borders of the shining plain lying to the south of Telat Abda.

"Alum," Dilir announced, taking up a handful where his boot had smashed through the crust. "Good for camels' sore feet. It may be useful," and he packed it into one of the bags.

As they drew nearer to the rocks Durham scanned the ground anxiously, and suddenly gave a little exclamation of relief, for there, coming in at an angle to their own, were the very marks for which he was looking, quite unmistakable, one camel led by a man in boots. "They are here!" he exclaimed with exultation in his heart, and they hastened forward.

When they reached the mouth of the wady Durham dismounted. His leg was less stiff now,

and he had taken his turn at walking during the morning. He and Dilir followed the camel, with the inert Pentland still on its back, and Nafeesa followed them. All at once they saw something move among the trees, and the lame camel, unhobbled, came toward them in a friendly way. Dilir recognised it at once, and glanced this way and that for its riders. But there was no sign of them. His practised eye, quick as that of a Bedouin, picked up the track leading to the boulder, and leaving the path or dry water-course he sprang up the side of the hill. Durham followed him. Together they turned the shoulder of the stone and read the tale which told itself as plainly as the tracks over the alum had done. They looked into each other's eyes, and each saw the other had read it too! Their faces hardened, and not a word did either of them speak as they went on down to the well. There they found the girl standing by the two camels, and Edgar Pentland full length on the ground with his head covered.

Quickly Durham stepped toward the camel which had brought them and stripped it of all its gear, then hastened to the well to fill the empty girbies. "What start have they?" he asked, and his voice was lower even than usual, coming up from the throat of a man half-strangled Dilir examined the signs around. "Possibly three hours," he answered, and he noticed that his friend's face had changed so that it looked like a forecast of what it might be when he was a man of sixty.

Meantime Durham had tried the bucket, drawn it up and found it empty. "We must go without water," he said between his teeth, but he knew in his heart that he was speaking vainly

Nafeesa sprang erect. "Another small well,

there," she said in her own language and pointed to the west.

"She is right," corroborated Dilir. "Small, but sweet water. This one is exhausted; possibly those who drew from it have not drawn from the other."

"How did you know about the well, Nafeesa?" he asked with the pride of a teacher in a promising pupil, as they climbed up to find it.

"Wells are known always to all the tribes—of course we know them; so many of the Aliab, so many for the Shantirab. This big well here very good well, deep but bitter, another small but good water."

Without difficulty she led them to where it lay marked by two stone pillars, and there they found sufficient to fill the skin and a bucket for the camel. In spite of Durham's urgency and the torture of allowing a minute to elapse, it was essential for any prospect of success, that the camel they would take on with them should be watered well and allowed to rest awhile, so he had to restrain himself as best he could, and the way he did it was characteristic; instead of fretting up and down, up and down, for the period of inaction, he found the best shade he could get, lay full length on his back with his helmet over his eyes, and remained motionless but intensely alert until Dilir gave the word.

Nafeesa, who would greatly have liked to come too, was left in charge of Pentland, to whom she had taken a violent dislike, and the lame camel; she had not even expostulated against the fiat which reduced her to such unwelcome company; she never thought of doing so, but the men knew well what was in her mind as she walked down to

the other end of the wady with them to see them start.

"There is something to be said for the obedience exacted from the women of the desert," said Durham as they rode off, amused in spite of his heart-tearing anxiety.

"But she must obey, of course," said Dilir. "You, too, say in the marriage service that the wife must obey."

"We don't interpret it quite so literally as you," returned Durham.

The sea of alum did not extend to this side of the wady, and at first their track lay plain as print before them on the firm sand, showing a company of riders some fifty strong. Then they came to loose shifting sand, and their already tired beast slithered, in spite of its great spongy feet, and they had to dismount and wade along beside it as best they could. Hour after hour they marched on, alternately riding with ease and struggling on foot, and then their spirits lightened, for they came on evidence that the whole caravan had encamped for a noon-tide rest, which meant that they might pick up a little of the time lost. This is not usual in the case of native riders and was an unexpected gain.

There was, however, no sign of the quarry even on the farthest sky-line, only the marks flowed onward like the ripple of a broad river.

When the sun fell and it became too dark to see the tracks in the sand, they dismounted to rest and wait until the moon got up. They made no fire, but Dilir fed the camel on some fodder he had cut and carried, and they dined off meal and dates with water to drink. One luxury at least was not lacking, for Dilir produced plenty of

rough-cut native tobacco. He then lit up with his flint and tinder-box, carefully drawn out from the innermost recesses of his shirt, for it was now one of his greatest treasures, as reminiscent of romance to him as the lace-edged scrap which recalls the scented recess of a ball-room to another sort of wooer.

In perfect content he lay flat on his back and let his thoughts dwell on the girl who had sprung straight into the citadel of his heart by the magic of her charm. Durham, lying beside him, was also stretched straight, but his aching throbbing leg made any position painful, and from time to time he moved to ease it. Dilir's thoughts had their reflex in him, for anxious as he was about the quest on which they were going, his mind was not so wholly absorbed as to leave no room for this best comrade of all.

"Old man," he said at last in a tone of affection few would have given him credit for being able to use—indeed, to none other man under the sun would he have used it—"this girl—you are determined to have her?"

And Dilir spoke to him also as he would have spoken to none other. "She is in my heart," he said. "Never until now have I known the love of a woman as the English know it. Keen as a sword-blade has it smitten me, rending in twain my inmost life, and all the world has become new. Naught knew I of its glory and its sharpness. I spoke as a boy might speak in his rawness, slightingly, of things hidden from mine eyes, but now I see. Thou too, Bimbashi, thou knowest that of which I speak?"

"I know it," Durham said shortly, and he brought it out with difficulty even to this man.

Dilir was, as he had said, smitten in two. Never until now had he dreamed that anything potent enough to out-weigh his love for Durham could come into his life, and of all things in the world a woman had risen with such potentiality! For the first time in his life his buoyant gallant soul was torn between two courses. Supposing Durham refused to countenance this marriage? Dilir knew that the English would regard Nafeesa's marriage with the Bishary more seriously than he did, it might be considered an impediment, and even if it were not he was scornfully and bitterly aware that many of the men who met him at table, and talked to him as an equal, would consider his dark blood and savage heritage as an insuperable obstacle if it came to giving their womenkind in marriage to him. He hardly thought this would hold in the case of Durham, but it might with the fair boy, his cousin. He weighed the prospect in silence, and he knew past all doubting that though he would have stood and let savages gnash him with knives until the life-blood drained away were it to save Durham, yet here there entered into the matter a new element altogether, and that if he had to sacrifice the friendship of this his closest comrade or the love of Nafeesa, Nafeesa would win.

But Durham had begun to speak again slowly. "It must rest with Temple," he said, "and what view he will take I cannot tell. For myself, though she is of my own blood and race, I could not wish her to meet a better fate than to wed a man like thee, Hawk, but few there are in any generation like thee!" Unconsciously he adopted the softened form of the second person singular when talking with Dilir.

So they lay in silence until the golden moon of great size rose swiftly in the east. The night was quite different from the previous one; at this season in the desert it is hardly possible to predict from hour to hour the unaccountable variations in the climate; to-night the air was clear as crystal, and the sand lay like snow before them.

"It is likely," said Dilir as they mounted once more, "that they will not camp to-night. They will be hastening home with their booty. With so bright a moon they may travel until day dawns without a break."

"Who is the sheikh of the Adoliab? It has slipped my mind."

"Bir Azim, a crafty man and fierce. He has a grudge against the English, and the fact that these men of his have hastened their captives off without delay shows that they thirst to lay them before him." Dilir spoke as he thought; he had no notion of softening an unpleasant prospect to a man of his own calibre.

So they rode, and intently from time to time they scanned the horizon ahead of them, urging on their docile camel. At length they were rewarded by seeing a faint wavering mass which seemed to spread and contract on the sand like water blown hither and thither. Both men felt for their weapons, but neither broke the silence. They had come for the most part at a steady trot, while their foes had used only the slow two and a half to three miles an hour of the camel's walk. It was impossible to tell whether the Arabs knew they were being pursued, but it was highly unlikely they had overlooked such an important fact. The pursuers were still overtaking them, and the mass in front spread more and more large and

distinct, as it was overhauled, until the soft shuffling of the many camels' feet and the burrs and grunts and clicks intermingled with it could be clearly heard. Then Dilir shouted loudly and clearly in Arabic for the foray party to halt. "Halt ye, and no hurt shall follow, for we come in peace!"

He received no verbal answer, but the swaying mass contracted violently, and pressed on harder than ever; there were gesticulations of raised arms and the noise of words of haste shouted at the camels. Once more Dilir hailed them, adding words in a native dialect unknown to Durham. The group seemed all at once to spread out again, in response to some word of command from within, probably with the idea of making a less certain target in case the pursuers fired, but not one halted or stayed in his going, and their shadows fled blackly after them across the surface of the great plain, which here was exceptionally smooth. The weird chase pursued its way, the two behind the many in front, and the hard breathing and deep-mouthed objurgations and groans became louder and louder. Quite suddenly someone from the foremost party wheeled round and fired; there was a yellow flash and some shot fell harmlessly, short of the two men behind. In reply Dilir fired his revolver over the heads of the scrambling straining mass, telling them loudly he would fire into the midst unless they stopped to parley. In both his heart and Durham's was a deadly fear lest their overdriven camel might fail them at the critical moment before they got even with the marauders. Evidently this was what the Arabs hoped. As Dilir fired they scattered a little to right and to left, and one, separating himself from

the main body, made his camel stop, and, taking deliberate aim, fired back. He had a rifle, and the bullet passed so close to the two comrades that they both involuntarily ducked, and their camel seized that awful moment to sink to its knees with a gurgle. The Arab thought he had hit it, and rode on to join the others triumphantly, but he was not quite the last, for the keen eyes of the two men behind had sighted a double-laden camel making heavy going, away to the right, with a space between it and the rest on that side. The same thought gripped them both—the foremost figure was that of a swathed woman! Men of action, accustomed to seize the second of decision that makes all the difference between victory and defeat, they knew that the one chance left to them was to bring down that camel while still within range even of a revolver. Whether that would reward them with the fruit of their endeavour or not, lay on the knees of the gods! But the chance hung on a hair's-breadth. Though the moonlight was bright enough, it was deceptive, and the animal was moving up and down, up and down, with a strange resemblance to a boat labouring over the waves. In such conditions it was just as likely that a shot would strike the woman as the camel, but in a few minutes even this slender chance would be gone. Durham had the rifle, and hesitated not a second. Far rather would he shoot Iona with his own hand, if Iona it was, than let her be carried captive to the den of thieves! As he fired, Dilir's revolver rang out beside him, both men grandly taking the risk of their skill. The animal lurched, stumbled, recovered itself and went on apparently as before. Again two shots rang out, and this time down came the

beast on its hindquarters, while both its riders pitched right off on the far side. Then the camel raised its head with a long shudder and looked piteously at the two men who rushed toward it. Durham was there first and dashed round to the far side. His heart beat suffocatingly, and something seemed to block his throat as he unrolled the swathing Arab cloak from the foremost prostrate figure. Then he stood stock still, held in the grip of an overpowering rush of feeling, as Iona, all dishevelled and dazed, sat up and staggered to her feet. She looked wildly round, and seizing Durham's arms clung to him in agony. The sudden revulsion of feeling was too much for her. Again and again she cried, "Don't leave me, oh, don't leave me; don't let them have me! Oh God! That man!"

His arms closed round her as if to assure her by that fact of all that words could not utter. She grasped his coat by both hands, and pressed her face against him to shut out the horrors, afraid to move, afraid to turn lest the nightmare should prove true. She was at the end of her nervous strength. He took no advantage of her helpless weakness, but as her head was beneath his chin he bent forward a very little, and his lips rested for an instant on her hair. It was lighter than a butterfly's kiss, but she felt it at once, her shuddering ceased, and she rested as if asleep in the sanctuary of his strength.

Dilir meantime had rolled over the burly Arab who had been her companion and pointed gleefully to a small round hole in his left temple, just beneath the white head-covering, now darkly stained.

"Bull's-eye!" he ejaculated with the utmost satisfaction. "Just where I aimed the second

time. Seemed a pity to kill a good camel when a man would do as well. However, I'm afraid you've done for him, sir; your second bullet went through at the back just under the spine."

"Hullo!" said a voice in English. They all started, Iona came to herself and stepped back, and Durham let her go instantly. They had forgotten Maurice, who now appeared from the background leading a camel by the halter. "Nice lot you are," he said cheerfully. "I might have been half-way to the Red Sea by now for all you cared! Had to manage the trick myself."

"And how was it you did that?" inquired Dilir, showing all his white teeth in one of his engaging grins.

"Bunged him off," Maurice explained. "The chap who was carrying me along. Wasn't so simple as it sounds either, for at first I had my hands tied behind me, but I had been working for a long while to get them free, and when the shooting began, he seemed to get a nasty jar, so with a sudden heave I got rid of him, and managed to retain my own balance. This beast rabbited off into the wilderness on his own, and I have only just persuaded him to come back."

"But where is the man?" Dilir asked, a little sceptically, still smiling.

"Picked himself up and was going to scoot after me, but thought better of it and rejoined his friends, who are half-way home now I guess."

Iona began to laugh rather idiotically. "Oh, Maurice dear, I am so glad. I can't help laughing, I wish they would all go scooting or rabbiting, or whatever it is, for ever and ever——"

They all began to laugh; then Durham led her back to where their own beast lay, none the worse

for its desperate tumble, but very tired. He propped her up beside it, and gave her a drink of water. One of the girbies had burst in the fall, but the other was still intact. Dilir went out to put an end to the camel which had been shot, and incidentally to do a bit of butchery which he kept out of sight at first, having regard to European squeamishness. Maurice brought up his mount to the bivouac and made it squat down, and was delighted to discover his own revolver among its trappings.

"But won't they come back?" Iona asked fearfully.

"Not a bit of it," Dilir assured her. "Those men are none too ready to face bullets. I don't suppose they had more than the one blunderbuss and the rifle we heard among the lot of them. They'll go for all they're worth for hours now, as if somebody very hot and flaming was after them."

"Shouldn't mind him, hoofs wouldn't make much headway on this stuff, would they?" remarked Maurice. "Any tobacco going?"

At that moment, with an exclamation at his own negligence, Dilir sprang to his feet and poked and cursed at the tired naga until she condescended to rise and be milked. Then he asked Mrs. Pentland for her topee to use as a pail.

"But my head has been in it," objected Iona rather confusedly.

"Hands up for who minds!" cried Maurice the irrepressible. "No one but me, carried against me, two to one. Use it, I'm resigned. Oh for the wells of Telat Abda after contact with that Beduwy. Whoever bivouacs next to me will have an uneasy night of it I'm afraid. 'Telat is my wash-pot.' You never really feel the beauty

of these poetic similes until necessity brings them home to you!"

Dilir brought the filled topee to Iona, who drank deeply. "It's the most delicious thing I ever tasted," she said.

"'Three drowned mice,'" began Maurice.

"Oh, I didn't see there was so little! I've left hardly any for the rest of you," Iona cried self-reproachfully.

"I obtained the camel for you especially," said Dilir, smiling with pleasure.

"You are the most thoughtful man I ever met," she said gratefully.

"You don't do it in anything like befitting desert style," cut in Maurice, who was so radiant to be with his friends again in safety, that he could not help effervescing. "Hawk, you are an A 1, Double-Blue, high-power sort of man, and I like you!"

There was only one long cloak, that which Iona had herself been swathed in. This was around her as she lay beside the milch-camel in utter exhaustion of mind and body, a kind of blissful numbness seemed to have overtaken her. The three men sat huddled up against the body of the second camel, and she heard them talking on and on into the early hours of the morning; they had much to hear and tell. She fell asleep presently, and awoke again an hour later, with an awful jerk. Then she realised the jerk was only mental, and she turned on her side to reassure herself as to the proximity of her companions. The moon had shifted low down in the west, and the bodies of the camels threw long shadows quite disproportionate to their height. Durham was in the shadow and could not be seen. Maurice seemed to be

lying across his legs with his face downward on his crossed arms. Dilir—for the moment a dart of fear pierced her heart—was it Dilir? He was completely dressed in the wrappings of the dead Arab rolled around over his own clothes. He had doubtless offered them to his friends first, knowing the bitter cold of the nights, but they had been more squeamish than he, so he enjoyed them all to himself, and looked like a tall Arab lying straight and still as a mummy on the sand. Iona's heart warmed again to peace; with three such staunch men to guard her, what need she fear? Even as she drowsed off through her half-shut eyes she saw Dilir, whom she had thought fast asleep, sit up suddenly and look outward into the desert, and some tiny greyish beast, invisible before, seemed to materialise and vanish inside of two seconds. Some sense of vibration unknown to her had warned the Pathan of the jackal's presence.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE JEWELLED VALLEY

Two days later found the whole party still at Telat Abda. Though there shone in the hearts of at least four of them the radiant gladness of the " light that never was on land or sea," it was idle to deny that they were in a position of extreme peril. There could hardly have been two men more fitted by nature and experience to lead them through the desperate venture that lay ahead, but desperate it was in all ways, for what they had gone through already was but child's play to what must now be faced. To attempt to strike back and get to Murrat would have been to walk straight to death, for assuredly the German Thies would guard that direction. The only alternative was to take the journey directly northward, which, with the best of luck, would mean at least three days of going across a desert almost completely waterless and made up of open plains of orange sand, where drifts, the deadly simoon and the suffocating sand pillars might be encountered. Once they could cross this they would reach a high chain of black mountains running like a bar east and west, and having only one really feasible outlet known as The Bab. As this was in the region claimed by the Ababde and out of the run

of the Bisharein, there was just the chance that Thies had less influence here. Through The Bab (the gate) they would be almost safe, because the dwellers beyond were comparatively civilised, wandering up and down between that and the Nile, carrying on trade, and in continual intercourse with Europeans.

To achieve that adventurous journey their resources were quite inadequate. As one girby had burst, the remainder sufficed to carry only sufficient water for the party for two days even with the utmost economy, not counting any for the camels. Their scanty stock of meal was almost gone, and though the day of their return Dilir and Maurice managed to snare some of the rock partridges, which were fairly plentiful in the valley, and they ate these to save the meal, which was easier to carry with them, even then they had provisions for only about two days after they set out. The English, except Durham, had refused to touch the dried camel-meat, and Nafeesa in her turn had disgustedly turned up her nose at the partridges, declaring they were as bad as snakes or toads. The people she had lived among considered " bird-eater " a term of reproach ; only the two leaders contentedly absorbed anything set before them without question.

The camel, whose lameness had been slight, was whole again after repeated applications of alum, and they all felt thankful that the raiders had not killed it in sheer wantonness. They had therefore now three camels, of which the naga was distinctly the best, for armament they had two revolvers, a pistol and a rifle, with a fair amount of ammunition. The valley afforded sufficient fodder for the camels to feed well before starting, and some could

be taken along with them. Things might have been worse.

Time was, of course, the essence of safety, and yet the camels must have rest, and fodder must be cut, and so, after earnest consultation, the leaders had agreed to the second day's stay in the valley as being the lesser of two evils.

Iona was unusually silent as she sat at the scanty breakfast on the hill-side. She was still worn by the shock and terror of her capture, and physically tired by the long ride out and back into the desert, though in the second case the return journey had been slow, and Durham, who had taken the seat on the she-camel behind her, gave her support with his arm whenever she needed it. Edgar had been unusually effusive on her return and even inclined to make clumsy jests; she had been thankful to get away from him by creeping into the sort of little hut Nafeesa had made for herself between two bushes. Durham and Dilir, after telling the others frankly how they were placed, discussed the situation no more, but talked of other matters.

"Coloquintida, beastly stuff," said Dilir when Maurice produced a piece of the brilliant green bush like broom that the camel had refused to consider as food. "The little gourds are useful to make cups of, but I think we don't need them."

Maurice spoke of the wonderful coloured rocks.

"Jasper, cornelian, agate," said the knowing Dilir. "Some of the long icicles or pendants are like rubies."

He got up and strolled along the valley with Maurice to collect some, and Iona, dreading to be left with her husband and Durham, broke away from everyone and went up to a quiet place

on the hill-side to try to get a grip on herself once more, and reduce this chaotic state of feeling that was pulsing in her. From where she sat she could still see Dilir and Maurice away up the valley, and a sudden burst of laughter rang out from them as if they had some glorious jest together.

A short time after, Edgar Pentland, wandering about to find her, encountered them well out of hearing of the rest.

"Have you seen my wife?" he asked Maurice, having consistently and pointedly ignored Dilir ever since his return to Telat Abda.

"Not lately," replied Maurice briskly. "And you are not going to see her either until you're more presentable."

Edgar Pentland looked at him, and twitched his mouth, and as he had no stick, began to twirl on his heels with his hands in his pockets.

Young Temple's soft face was full of mischief. "Do you understand what I mean?" he asked in what was for him an unusually sharp tone. "Captain Dilir Khan and I are agreed it is a disgrace to us all that a man of our party should cut such a slovenly figure. Why, hang it all, if I had to die I'd want to die decent! You don't seem to have any such feeling, so we're going to teach it to you with my razor, and uncommon good it is of me to use my razor on your dirty face!" Desert life had had its effect on Maurice, and the polish had worn off. For answer Pentland began to munch his lower jaw and tried to push past.

"You had better let Mr. Temple do as he suggests, unless you prefer to be handled by a 'dirty black native,'" said Dilir in a voice as soft as silk.

Pentland's little round blue eyes spat fire, he almost foamed at the mouth, and strung out such

a fury of curses that the other two with one accord leaped toward him. Dilir placed one long steely hand across his mouth, and neatly tripped him up backwards, while Maurice, who had carried his instruments with him, set to work at once.

Pentland was helpless, for he lay on his back, with Dilir seated on his legs, holding his wrists in a grip like a trap, and whenever he opened his mouth to scream, Maurice with a chuckle of delight thrust the shaving-brush inside. They had a pair of nail-scissors with them, and they clipped his hair and as much of the stubble as they could get off his face before beginning serious business, then they worked away alternately with the razor, which was not so sharp as it once had been, and when used with a very sparing economy of soap was a most painful ordeal to the victim.

"Shall we leave him that little bit of imperial he used to think such a lot of before the rest of the stubble overflowed it?" asked Maurice presently.

"I think not," said Dilir deliberately. "Never considered it made him look beautiful; off with it," and so a clean sweep was made, while Pentland nearly exploded into small pieces with the force of his internal fury. At last they allowed him to sit up, advised him to go and get a good wash, and decamped chuckling like two schoolboys.

Maurice had not the least idea of the affair between Nafeesa and the Pathan. The day of their return everyone had been so worn out they had slept nearly every hour they were not eating. This pair of lovers did nothing to attract attention to their condition; there was no holding of hands, and they very rarely looked at each other. The emotion which stirred their brave souls lay too

deep to stain the surface, and only surged up at rare moments. Nafeesa, however, interested Maurice enormously, and he had a most proprietary feeling toward her, but so far she had persistently slipped away from him when he tried to speak to her. She was very much in his mind, though, all the time, and when he had finished with Edgar he hunted up Iona to ask her to do for him what he, unknown to her, had just done for her.

"I do just like that girl," he said when he found her, flinging himself unceremoniously down on the ground beside her. "There's a something, I don't know what, that makes me love her. The little nose-stud is too comical; fancy a woman Temple with a nose-stud! She has an awful lot to learn, of course. Iona, I've just been a real brick to you, and persuaded your husband to use my razor. 'One good turn deserves another,' as our friend Mrs. Gentle would say; how about your tackling Nafeesa?"

"You want me to clean her up?"

For a moment Maurice disregarded her reply and stared at her. "It's a curious fact," he began bluntly, "that in spite of sunburn and hardship you are a sight better looking than you were on the steamer."

She smiled a little, not offended by his frankness, for she knew well to what her blooming was due.

"Your eyes have got ever so much deeper, and your face is thinner," went on Maurice the candid. "It's odd how——"

"Yes, we needn't go into reasons," she cut in hastily. "About Nafeesa, I did try to do something for her this morning; I wanted her to wash——"

"And she?"

"Explained by gesture she had never washed once in her whole life, and didn't see the use of it—she pines for some oil."

"Hum," commented Maurice, "difficulties ahead. About her hair now, all those greasy little pig-tails——?"

"Impossible to do anything until we get to civilisation. I believe you'll have to take her to your heart as she is!"

He threw himself back, and then sat up suddenly as he heard a sort of smothered shriek from Nafeesa and one of Dilir's low winning laughs near at hand. The next minute they came into view, Dilir holding out an unusually large beetle in his hand, a huge horny thing that was trying to pinch his leathery skin.

"She thinks they're poisonous," the Pathan explained to Iona. "All the Bisharein do. Funny when they live among them!" and he made a motion as if to throw the beetle at Nafeesa, who rushed behind Iona.

Then he abruptly dropped the creature. "Time to stop fooling," he said. "There's any amount to do. You go and cut some fodder to carry with us, Nafeesa."

Maurice's cheek stained an angry red as if someone had struck it with a whip. "Not quite so fast," he said in a tone of immense dignity. "I'll thank you, Captain Dilir Khan, not to give orders to my sister. She's nothing to you, anyway."

Dilir looked at him steadily and then at Nafeesa, who came forward, nodding her head rather emphatically at Maurice, and took up her stand by the man she had chosen. Dilir, for the first time

in his life, appeared slightly embarrassed. "We want to marry each other," he said in his most charming manner to Maurice. "I didn't mean to tell you this until we reached safety, but it seems it has to come."

An expression of utter sullenness swept over Maurice's face.

"Impossible!" he said curtly. "She is married already."

"Those ties can be cut," said Dilir persuasively.

"Whether they can or not, I do not give my consent to anything so preposterous."

The glad gleam went out of Dilir's face and it became hard as granite. "Because when it comes to marrying you consider me a 'dirty black native'?" he asked in a tone of studious self-repression.

Maurice also was trying hard for self-control; he spoke less arrogantly. "You can see at least that it is impossible to discuss such an idea in our present position," he explained and walked away, followed by Iona, who had been as much astonished as he at this revelation.

"I don't think, I honestly don't think, it is that," said Maurice bitterly to himself as soon as they were out of earshot. "Dilir is a white man all through, and the bravest of the brave, but it's a stunning disappointment to me. I had looked forward to having her to train and teach. She's so interesting and I have no one. Now——"

He looked up to see Durham's square face regarding him with an indescribable expression, and he recalled in a flash his own words on the verandah of the hotel at Assuan.

"It's all on your shoulders, Dollops," he burst out; "you made me come."

"I am well aware of it. I have considered it carefully, and you must realise the circumstances are very unusual; I cannot see Nafeesa married to an Englishman or leading an ordinary English life."

"Then you are on Dilir Khan's side?" burst out Maurice.

"I have not said so."

CHAPTER XIV

THE DANCE OF DEATH IN THE DESERT

LATE that night the two leaders were sitting over the fire in the camp. All the others were asleep, even Maurice, who was to be aroused to take the middle watch. Dilir was on duty first, and in spite of the prospect of a broken night when his turn came, and the early start at dawn on the morrow, Durham lingered by him.

"It is at The Bab that devil of a German will attack us if he knows his business," said Dilir. "Before that he will hope the desert may do the work, which would be far more convenient for him."

"The one regret I have is in leaving him behind," replied Durham.

"He will certainly want to kill you," suggested Dilir hopefully, "so perhaps we may take him with us yet."

In the grey dawn they set off. Iona was of course to ride the naga, as it was by far the best-paced steed. Durham had quietly arranged that he should be her companion, and the others could not object, seeing that his great weight would have overburdened the weaker animals. Dilir and Nafeesa, quite naturally and simply, took the worst camel as their share. And Maurice was told off to take Edgar on the camel he con-

sidered his own, as he had won it in the foraying raid. He was furiously aggrieved, and pointed out as firmly as he could that it was his right and privilege to carry his sister with him, and that he was willing even to take her on the worse camel if necessary. He spoke to Dilir on the subject in rather an offensive tone of superiority; Dilir looked at him and did not condescend to answer; it was obvious he had not the smallest intention of altering his plans. So Maurice sought out Durham, and asked him to exert his authority, but he got no help there.

"You aren't enough of an expert to get the best out of that poor camel," Durham said. "You'd fall behind and keep us all back."

"There is an obvious alternative," Maurice began rather hotly, but his cousin cut him short. "Obey orders," he said sternly, and there was nothing else to do.

The weight of two men is about as much as a camel can carry easily, and as there had to be in addition the fodder, and the water-skins and other gear, which, though not excessive, made up to a good many pounds, it was plainly to be seen that it would be necessary to go slowly and to relieve the animals as much as might be by walking whenever possible. The ordinary pace of a walking caravan camel is about two and a half to three miles an hour, but if well fed he can go at it for thirteen hours a day. Any such stretch of time in actual progress, however, was quite impossible for this party, who could not hope to accomplish anything like forty miles a day. The leaders had reckoned their average at about twenty-five. If they two had been alone, with good trotting camels, they could have done the distance to The

Bab in possibly two days or even under, but this was not to be expected in the circumstances.

The extreme variety of conditions in the desert precluded any definite estimate of the time likely to be taken. Here lay the danger. There are great tracts of the Atbai where the coarse sand or small pebbly gravel makes ideal going, but there are again patches where the soft sand forms deadly drifts; this sand is incredibly fine, having been driven by the hot winds for thousands of years; it penetrates everywhere like silky dust. At other places large loose stones cut the camels' feet and hinder them.

The word "monotony" so constantly used of the desert by those who do not know it is ludicrously misapplied. The desert varies like the sea. Every new horizon shows its own features, and not only are there seldom two parts alike, but they do not remain the same from month to month. The long low swelling undulations of one part may become tempestuous sand-waves another time. The apparently dead sand of a depression may, after a slight rain, become a brilliant stretch of orange and green. The wild whirl of a simoon blast may completely transform a plain into a rude collection of humps or conical hills.

The almost continuous wind from the north was refreshing to the party, and saved the need of constant recourse to the water-skins; on the other hand, if it rose above a certain velocity it would make it practically impossible for them to face it. The first day's journey was not unlike some they had already experienced in their first days of captivity, the sand was coarse and firm, and afforded good going, and the hearts of the leaders rejoiced. They walked almost all day, just ahead

of their animals, though Edgar was permitted to continue riding without comment. There was not much chance for conversation, and the sand-grit which filled any mouth that was open effectually prevented any unnecessary attempts.

By midday the wind dropped a little, and it was very hot. The feeling of being always the centre of a vast circle, which rather oppresses those unused to it, was merged in the sense of being enfolded by a shimmery cloud such as that which can be seen in the distance along the ground at some distance off even in England on a very hot day. Here it seemed to dance around the little plodding party and bathe them in transparent undulations. There was even a shrill singing in the ears like the fine drawn note thin glass might be expected to emit. It beat with a tingle on the hearing. The doggy tainted smell of the camels was more and more noticeable as the day wore on. And so overpowering was the radiated heat from the sand, that the two women, having dismounted at midday, were very ready to go on again as they were raised above the ground in their saddles.

It was about six o'clock, when Dilir, looking round the open plain, announced that after the stiff and almost continuous day's work they had done, they had better camp and get as good a night's rest as possible. There was not a blade or bush, but the camels were supplied with the fodder they had themselves carried, and after seeing to them the men scooped out a small hole in the sand for the two women to rest in. Dilir scanned the neighbourhood for fuel, but failed to find any dried jella to make a fire. Then he industriously turned up several small heaps about the size of a child's sand-castle, as if he expected

to discover something within. The only result was a handful of twigs too meagre to supply a fire. He explained that these heaps are formed by the sand blown over the remains of scant bushes, dried up for want of water, and may sometimes afford quite good fuel, but there was no luck to-night. He milked the naga, however, and showed with pride that she yielded a couple of pints, about enough to fill one of the tin pans and half the other. It seemed a very little store for so great an animal, but the she-camel's yield is at the best not much more than three pints, and after a journey not so much can be expected. When the beasts had swallowed their supper, they couched, folding their many-jointed hind legs under them, and resting on the hard callosities of the skin, the huge zora or breast-pad, which supports the immense neck, making a sort of cushion for the front. There they lay, ruckling and chawing with their great flaggy lips moving, the live-long night.

"I envy camels," Maurice exclaimed bitterly as he watched them, after having attempted to pat one and having received a snarl and snap in response. "They live 'bounded by themselves and unregardful' of anything else, as the poet says. They don't care a snap for the good opinion of anyone."

The men camped beside the unemotional beasts, glad of the shelter of their high sides. There was no need to tie up their knees here to prevent their straying, as there was no pasture to tempt them to wander. The men, exclusive of Edgar, kept watch in turns the whole of the night, and by the earliest dawn a move was made so that the march might be resumed.

A curious listlessness had fallen on most of the party, brought on by the lack of proper food, and the ceaseless exertion; and when Iona heard the movements of the men she felt as if the effort to stir was too much for her. She made a struggle, however, and rose from the sandy nest, so hard to unaccustomed limbs, and joined Nafeesa, who was standing by Dilir beside the naga. He had just been trying to milk her, and shook his head. "No good," he said. "These camels are not used to being milked twice in the day. It is best to leave it until night when we shall need it more. Now we have water."

Iona looked with a curious sense of detachment at the ungainly beast, and noticed the odd marks it had left in the sand. "It's like some great horny-backed insect," she said, pointing to the impression, that, with the slight concavity formed by the body, bounded by the dint for the zora at one end, and the two small dints made by the hinder joints at the other, gave no indication at all of the beast which had made it.

Breakfast was dry fare, supplemented by a dose of reddish water from the skins, which had impregnated their contents with the colour and savour of Russian leather.

As the sun cleared the horizon, a curious apparition appeared in the north-east. Iona, who was seated on her saddle, swathed around in one of the two cloaks they possessed, did not see it until her attention was drawn to it by the stoppage of her camel, then she peeped out and saw all the others staring open-mouthed. It seemed for the moment as if they were looking into a wood of giant trees, whose immense trunks rivalled in girth the growth in Californian forests.

"What on earth is it?" she asked feebly.

"Sand-pillars," answered Durham, who was standing beside her. "Formed of whirlpools in the loose sand as water-spouts are in the sea."

The huge structures towered ominously up to the very sky, and cut off so many of the low sun's rays that the weird half-light of an eclipse was produced. The camels moved uneasily and tried to turn their backs to the storm, for well they knew what it meant, and the dread effects of the cutting sand in their exposed eyes. The pillars, which were from two to three miles away, receded all at once, and must have gone at an extraordinary pace, for the diminishing size of their diameter could be distinctly seen, and as they opened out and the sun shone more freely through them a most beautiful effect appeared. The sun's rays shot between them and seemed to break into them, barring and ringing them with gold, while all round was a kind of golden vapour framing them in glory. It was like nothing earthly, and the uncanniness of the whole phenomenon seemed to suggest a mysterious superhuman agency. The columns rapidly changed their position again, and moved sideways, bowing and swaying as if setting to partners, then once more rushed forward, growing stupendously and becoming darkly menacing. Durham hissed to the camel he was holding in order to make it kneel.

"Better get down," he said to the women. "If they come here, we shall have to cover up our heads and take our chance."

Even as he spoke a fiercer blast of wind sent a curtain of sand all over them, in hair and mouth and eyes, as a forecast of the smothering folds they might expect.

"Are they dangerous?" Iona asked in a whisper as she stood beside her camel.

Dilir nodded. "If one of those pillars happened to fall on any of us, we'd never come to the surface again. Look!"

One of the largest burst asunder as if smitten by a shell in the centre, the lower half collapsed in a shapeless hump and the top seemed to be drawn up into the clouds. The onlookers gasped. The camels snorted uneasily and fidgeted in a way most unusual considering their natural dignity.

"Have you ever seen them before?" Dilir asked Nafeesa.

She indicated yes. "But they are now going away," she added calmly.

She had perceived the slight change in the wind even before he did. It was true; the waltz of death had taken a new direction, and bowing and setting to partners, the monstrous columns began to flirt off more to the southwards.

"I think that's done it," said Durham with relief in his tone. "They won't come back from the south, and they are below our latitude now. How far off do you make them, Hawk?"

"About three miles." As he spoke Dilir glanced anxiously at the south. "They will not come back, but the simoon may succeed them, it often does," he said.

"Not at this time of year?"

"It has been known. I was in it myself one January six years ago, a long low strip of purple, the most brilliant colour you ever saw, came along so many feet from the ground; we were nearly suffocated."

"But you got through all right?" asked Maurice suddenly; he had not spoken before.

"Yes, we got through all right and we will now; better be going on out of this region."

The relaxation of tension in Durham showed Iona more than any words could have done, the deadly peril they had escaped. Yet while it lasted she had not been afraid, only intensely interested and strung up.

Now as she mounted again and jogged along, she realised she had felt no fear and understood why. How could anyone fear to go out into the Great Unknown in such gallant company? It would not be like slipping away alone with no soul who understood.

If they had been overwhelmed by the sand-drifts, together their bones would lie, covered with the warm sand for untold ages. Together their souls would cleave the invisible to the great company of the brave!

But the rest of that awful day required far more real courage than the few moments of sudden danger.

They had not gone far before they came upon a most extraordinary set of what looked at first like low hills. They proved to be made entirely of pure sand, and lay in long regular rows, each one the facsimile of its neighbour. These curious formations were something like the long paper funnels twisted up by village shopkeepers to hold a penn'orth of sweets, and they lay along the ground, slanting north-east and south-west. They were so closely set that it was impossible to go between them, and a long détour had to be made to get round them. When eventually this was accomplished, it could be seen how all the hollow ends faced one way, in regular order like a set of caves. But what lay beyond made Dilir set his

teeth with anger, as he glanced at Durham, who, he knew, was feeling the same. For they had arrived at the nursery whence generated the strange monsters who performed the dance of death in the desert. For endless seeming miles the ground was ploughed up as if it had been scored by a giant ploughshare. It ran in innumerable crested waves, none much more than from five to seven feet, terminating in a sharp lip as if the sea had been suddenly petrified just as the billows had risen and not yet fallen. Something of the same sort, on a much larger scale, but with less numerous crests, had been seen from the steamer coming up from Assuan. But it was a different thing admiring the sharp clean outlines from the cool deck of a steamer and struggling on amid these waves in the heat of an Egyptian sun, when every hour might make all the difference to life itself!

The men began to lead the camels, trying to work their way in and out of the hollows, an interminable performance like the threading of a nightmare maze. No sooner had they turned the end of one billow than they had to work back along the trough in a parallel direction to clear the next. They seemed to make no headway whatever, and the sun beating down into the hollows, and reflected from the concave sides, was like the temperature of an oven. Once or twice impatiently Dilir made his camel scramble over some low crest to break through to the next, but always as he did it he regretted it, for the beast, with the sand well up its legs, ploughed and gasped and then tumbled down the slope, as if it would pitch on its head. Suddenly he looked round and saw, to his amazement, that Edgar

Pentland was still seated on the camel which Maurice led, next to him.

His face flashed with such an ominous expression that it looked like lightning bursting out from a thunder-cloud. "Get down," he ordered, without softening or explanation. Pentland was cowed, he did not even munch, he threw his long legs over the side and slipped off the camel without waiting for it to kneel, and silently plodded along after it.

The nightmare feeling was intensified to Iona by the fact that she could see Durham's leg was still painful. He had got along well enough on the level, but here, with the constant jerks and changes of action, now and again she saw his face tighten up as if he bit off an involuntary exclamation at an unusually bad twinge. She knew it was not the slightest use expostulating, and that nothing would induce him to ride while the others walked, so she had to bear it in silence. Indeed, as the time went on she found she had enough to bear on her own account, and even the feeling for his pain faded away behind her own intense thirst, which rose suffocatingly, overpoweringly, so that all the world was dwarfed by it as if it had been a great genie filling the heavens. She could think of nothing but this. In the beginning she had made the proud resolve that she would ask no advantages on account of her sex, taking only those that were obvious and offered as a matter of course by the men themselves. She would ask for no privileges. It would be easy enough, for would she not be fortified by seeing their indomitable hardihood? However, now her resolve broke down weakly. Again and again she was on the point of asking Durham to let her

have a little water, and each time she clenched her teeth and kept silence it became harder. At last the tears stood in her eyes, and she felt that she would go raving mad if she did not have water, and babbling with her dry swollen tongue she made him understand. He pulled up at once. They were for the moment alone, because they had not turned the corner of the next sand-crest. He took down a water-skin and held up his hand for her handkerchief. Understanding his meaning, she gave it to him, and he wetted it in the skin, passed it back and tied up the mouth of the girby. All her self-control gave way. "I want a drink, a good refreshing drink!" she gasped. "Give it to me—how dare you?" She had become almost unaccountable for her actions.

"Suck that handkerchief, spread it over your face, you'll soon get relief," he answered, and from the way he spoke she could see that his mouth too was like a lime-kiln. Eagerly she sucked the few drops, and then seeing inexorable decision in his expression, she did as he said, partly to hide her tears of wrath and humiliation. She heard him speaking a few minutes after. "If you drank now you would be worse in an hour," he said, and they went on silently. He had been right; in a very short time she had gained some relief, and a bitter flood of ignominy overwhelmed her, for he had not touched the water, not even one drop to cool his tongue!

After awhile they came upon the others, camped in a kind of hollow among these temporary dunes, down which what wind there was from the north, blew, and the sides, rising high and scooping over, afforded some sort of shelter. Here they rested for two or three hours. No one could have eaten,

but all longed for water. For the first time Iona noticed that Maurice's camel alone did not carry any. The water-skins were arranged on hers and Dilir's. Well did she know why! It was not Maurice the men could not trust! A desolation of soul more painful even than before overwhelmed her. She and her husband! There were a pair of them!

Dilir measured out the small amount of water each was to have, very accurately in the little tin pans, which he cooled first by filling them with the cooler sand scooped from the base of the shadowed dune. He advised the women to wet their handkerchiefs in some of their share and put them on their faces. Iona had already felt the benefit of that method, and silently obeyed after she had greedily swallowed most of her luke-warm portion. With a swelling heart she looked at Durham, but he too had soaked a handkerchief and put it over his burning face, and she had no means of judging what he thought of her lapse. "It is a very curious thing," said Dilir, who seemed far the least affected of any of the party, "there are no flies here, no insects of any sort. In some parts of the desert, such as this, there is not a living thing of any kind or sort, while in others scorpions, beetles, ticks and other things abound. Here there are not even worms. I have, in a part similar to this, found the body of a man who had been dead for years; he was burnt to a mummy, all the juices dried up in him, but nothing had preyed upon him, not even the smallest!"

Their nightmare struggle through the region of the sand-drifts came to an end about six o'clock. The depressions and heights grew less and less, and finally they emerged on to the great uncertain

plain with its sweeping gentle levels. As far as eye could reach either way, in looking back, the roughness of the sand-storm prevailed, and it was easily to be seen why they had not been able to skirt this unexpected obstacle.

They had hoped to get to a small well that evening, marked, as Dilir explained, by one single tree, a most curious thing, and when at length this gaunt sign-post, standing alone apparently in the flattest level, came in sight, their pulses quickened.

"Water, Nafeesa?" asked Dilir, expanding his nostrils as if he would sniff it.

"No smell have it," she answered mournfully in English.

"There is no smell of it," corrected Dilir carefully, for he was extremely anxious to improve her English.

In spite of his poorer mount he and Nafeesa had been everywhere ahead; he had managed to get much more out of his beast than the others had done from their superior mounts while apparently wearying it less. He and Nafeesa went on at once, and reached the place some minutes before the rest. He dismounted and found the well choked with sand and gravel.

As he turned back to help Iona to dismount the telegraphic signal of his eyes explained the situation to Durham. But aloud he said carelessly, "Well blocked; when we've rested we must clear it out for to-morrow."

The unwritten law of the desert forbade their denuding the already stripped tree any further of its wood, so no fire could be made, but they camped around its roots, and the two women enjoyed the luxury of covering their faces with the scanty

supply of face cream left, by means of which Iona had already won Nafeesa's devoted gratitude. They sat there, feeling their skin swollen and puffy and raw with the sun and exposure, while the men arranged everything.

All the provision they had left was a bag of native meal or sour dhurra flour which had been on the camel Maurice captured. He had been about to throw this away after sniffing it, but Dilir had indignantly rescued it and brought it along. The appearance of it was not attractive. It had a kind of bluish gritty look resembling mortar. It is made by the dhurra being smashed up on any handy stone without being washed first. As it is ground some water is sprinkled on it, and the meal or paste which results is almost as full of dirt as flour. This is left to ferment, and afterwards spread on an iron plate and heated, then broken up into little bits or crushed between the hands and serves as provision for a journey. It was much coarser and more objectionable than the more carefully prepared flour used in the camps, and differed vastly from the cakes made with all precautions of cleanliness by Iona.

However, in their present position even this stuff was invaluable. Dilir milked the naga, and mixed the sour meal in the two little pans with the milk into a kind of paste, and this, with tepid and tainted water, formed their meal. At first the two Pentlands and Maurice Temple looked very much askance at the paste, but they were extremely hungry, and when they saw the other three swallowing it down in great mouthfuls they followed suit, and after that was done Dilir produced some of the fruit of the doum palm which he had brought secretly as a great treat. The

fruit was about the size of a small orange, but when it was tasted and found to be like wood, flavoured with nutmeg, even hunger could not persuade the more fastidious of them to go on with it, though he and Nafeesa enjoyed it. Then they all stretched themselves out for their well-earned rest, and the men enjoyed with bliss a pipeful of tobacco apiece.

Maurice, who was feeling extraordinarily played out, lay flat on his back a little apart from the others, while his mind ran on an unpleasant story told to him by his cousin sometime ago. It was the fate of an officer and his servants who had got lost in the desert, and were found long afterwards, with their teeth deeply imbedded in the dry twigs of some desert bush. Such a fate was within measurable distance of themselves. The well he knew was hopeless; that fact had not been concealed from him; he had been told it would have been simply waste of their much-needed strength to try to tackle it. The next day they must ride on into a waste of desert with hardly enough water to wet their lips, for the skins were almost empty. Death he could meet in certain guises, but he had a horrible fear of himself when it came to torture. He had had a slight foretaste that day of what torture by thirst might mean, and his heart was faint with fear of the failure of his manhood.

The two women were sitting next to each other, with their backs against the largest camel, which continued its curious ruckling and gurgling as it chewed the cud of its fodder, without ceasing, on Iona's right was Edgar, and on Nafeesa's left was Dilir, and beyond him Durham.

Presently in the dark Nafeesa's brown hand stole silently up to the stem of Dilir's pipe. He

let it go, and she transferred it to her own mouth, and blissfully sucked in the smoke until he regained it after about two minutes.

"It is enough," he said in a whisper.

"Good," she answered in the same key. Then after another three minutes, "Again."

He put down the marauding hand. "No," he said, "English ladies don't smoke pipes."

"You are not English."

"What does that matter?"

"If Nafeesa marry you she is not English any more."

He laughed gently in the darkness. "Nafeesa now Bishary," he chaffed. "Married to a Bishary man."

She seized his arm and set her strong white teeth into it and bit hard. In an instant his other hand was at her throat, and he pinched firmly until she let go.

Iona, who followed some of this, was greatly amused at the horse-play; surely these two were well matched!

"Arm good?" Nafeesa demanded in English.

"Never bad, a little bite like that doesn't hurt me."

"Other arm?"

"Ah!" He took her hand in his and drew it across himself, letting her fingers run along the almost healed scar. Then carried her hand up to his face and pressed it against his weather-lined skin. So they rested side by side in the dark well content until Durham suddenly said, "Hawk!"

"Sir?" The hand was dropped instantly, and Nafeesa herself fell clean out of Dilir's mind as he rolled over on his side and began a low-toned

conversation with his chief, pitched so that none of the rest could hear.

"We shan't be able to make The Bab to-morrow," said Durham.

"Not now," agreed Dilir, "without sufficient water and with weary camels."

"Your plan?"

"There is the ruined miners' village of Gergaheit within eight hours' journey—I allow for these camels—there is a well of water in the village. Of course, there may be some of the tribesmen there, there usually are, but if they are only peaceful nomads they would not touch us, four men with arms."

"That is taking us more east than we want to go, out of our way."

"What else to do?"

"I do not know. There is the question of food too. Even if we make the village, we have no money to buy food, those scoundrels took all our money."

"There is food at Gergaheit. I made a cache there, not large, but enough to provide us for one day's journey." The dark Pathan was full of schemes, but had waited patiently until his advice was asked.

"Supposing we had found a plentiful supply of water here to-night, could we have made The Bab to-morrow?"

"I think so. With sufficient water it would not be too hard for us men to go all day fasting, and there would be enough dhurra paste for one more meal for the women."

"If we can get to Gergaheit, then we should have to go due west along the range of hills until we reach The Bab, I suppose?"

"It is my thought that if we reach Gergaheit and get food and water we might cross the range by a very narrow winding track or pass, between there and The Bab. It is difficult and dangerous, but might be less dangerous than to meet the German at The Bab."

"But he would certainly guard that pass too."

"He will not know of it; it is not told to Europeans; even among the natives there are very few who care to go that way. It was told to me by my brother-blood, an Ababde, now dead in a foray, but the secret is well guarded."

"There might be a chance."

"There are two ways to enter that pass," continued Dilir; "one starts about midway between Gergaheit and The Bab, and the other is not more than a mile this side of The Bab. They run together like the forefingers of a man's hand, so." And he placed his own long pointed lean forefingers together. "After that they continue in one to the other side, but the way is winding and most difficult to find."

CHAPTER XV

"I CANNOT LET YOU GO!"

WHILE dawn still hovered uncertain in the sky Dilir bestirred himself with the intent of wringing the last drop of milk from the naga for the benefit of the two women of the party. He regarded Nafeesa from different angles at different times. If he and she had been travelling alone together, they would have been desert mates, sharing alike the hardships and amenities, but as she was in the company of Iona she became for the moment an English lady, and as such entitled to special consideration from the men.

He did not expect to find much milk, for though the camels had been sufficiently fed the night before on the forage they themselves had carried, they had had no water, and had had a hard day's going, after which the naga had been well milked. However, to his satisfaction he got almost enough to fill the one little tin pan. This would do both to moisten the dry meal and allow the women to have a drink, while the men must manage with the remains of the skin-tasting water. Dilir did not spoil his offering by so much as wetting his lips, but set the small pan down on a flat block of stone and turned again to the naga. All at once his sixth sense warned him that something was happening behind his back. He swung round to

see Pentland leaning forward over the pan with his greedy hand extended. None of the rest of the party were visible, being still huddled up on the far side of the other two camels a little distance off. There was not a second to lose, for in that time the handle of the pan would have been grasped, and to stop the outrage then would mean the loss of the milk. With the ready instinct of the man who has many times had to leap to save his life, the Pathan covered the distance between them with one bound, his outstretched fist catching Pentland fair and square on the forehead with a tremendous impact. Edgar was felled, but as the blow had hit him on the hardest part of his skull he was not stunned, but lay munching and writhing in fury.

Dilir stood over him, tense and alert in every limb; part of the force in that blow had no doubt been born of a long-time feeling of soreness.

"I am glad to have had a chance of teaching you how to behave," he said in his soft slurring voice. "That milk is for the two ladies; your wife would have had to go without if you had drunk her share."

"How could I know that?" asked Pentland meanly.

"At any rate, it was not beyond your intelligence that it was not put there for you to swill while the rest of us went thirsty," continued Dilir remorselessly.

"You won't tell her?" whined Edgar.

"Tell!" Dilir withdrew; his scorn was so great he could hardly bear to be near this contemptible creature. "I would not make her more unhappy than I need," he added after a minute.

Then, seeing heads appearing above the squatting camels Edgar hastily got up.

The offering of milk was received differently by the two women, when apportioned into the two pans.

"For me?" Nafeesa asked delightedly. "Have all the men had some then?"

"No, for you two only, English fashion," said Dilir, smiling at her.

"I am certainly pleased to be English," rejoined Nafeesa, and absorbed her share readily after she had mixed with it the small handful of meal Dilir gave her.

Iona looked longingly at the milk, and then at Edgar, who, with a lump showing under the hair in front, sidled up and watched her greedily.

"You haven't had any? Oh, Edgar, you must, and all of you," she said, nobly holding out the pan.

Dilir advanced a little toward Edgar and said in an undertone, "Tell her you have had your share; lie to her."

As Edgar looked distinctly unaccommodating he went on. "If you don't, I shall tell her about just now. Say 'I have had my share.' You have, though it wasn't milk!"

"I have had my share," Edgar mumbled to his wife, completely cowed. She looked at him in surprise. "Have you? And you?" to Dilir.

"The Bimbashi and I always begin the day with water," he said pleasantly as Durham sauntered up to him. Durham caught his meaning at once. "Much better," he said. "But there isn't enough water for all of us, so we put you two off with the milk."

She did not believe him, but as she saw they

would not touch it, she finished her portion thickened with the meal.

The going in the early morning was not bad, the whole surface seemed of a dark brownish colour, and here and there were winding tracks of flat stones, that appeared as if they had been put there by the hand of man, for they all lay with the longer axes in the same direction. Out amid the brownish sand were patches of pebbles, a glory to look upon; some shone revealed by the sun as deep purple and were polished as by a lapidary, owing to the constant scouring of the minute sand grains; here and there jagged bits of dark yellow rock stuck up, which Dilir said were salt, but no one believed him. As the sun rose the heat once again grew intolerable, and Iona, who at Durham's suggestion had covered her head with the cloak, began muttering incoherently, and then pulling herself up with a jerk. Once she said inconsequently, "Hell itself could be no worse," and sat up abruptly, wondering if he had heard.

There, in front of her, and a good deal to the right, was a beautiful lake fringed by palm trees, with the water lying so still and clear beneath them that she could see their reflection!

Almost delirious with joy she cried out, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It is only a mirage," he said. "I hoped you wouldn't notice it—it will be gone in a few moments."

Mirage! It was impossible to believe! She had read of such things, but pictured them up in the air, dream-pictures; this was real in every detail. "Are you sure?" she asked doubtingly, but even as she spoke she saw a change come over

it, the outlines wavered and became misty, and then there was a curious blue haze and the details vanished.

"How cruel, cruel, cruel of it to come this day of all days!" she exclaimed, her dry lips rattling as she tried to frame the words. But Dilir had drawn up alongside and was pointing.

"There is really something there behind," he said. "There is often something which seems to start these mirages." He spoke more easily than the rest, but even he had some trouble in saying what he wanted.

The palm trees had been the last to vanish, and after wavering curiously had thickened out and then disappeared in the haze, but now they loomed through it again, straight and thick, very dark on one side, but not like palm trees at all, becoming more unlike every minute, until finally anyone could see they were conical oddly-shaped hillocks with a dark streak on one shoulder.

"Terrabil!" Dilir announced, and his tone rang with hope. "I have never seen any here, though I know there are some on the west of the Nile near Bir el Nakhla."

Durham looked the question he wanted to frame.

"It is possible," replied Dilir, "in many of these heaps there is water to be found, and here it is likely, as there is vegetation."

Even the camels seemed to prick forward with renewed energy. As they drew nearer, it could be seen that there were at least thirty of these odd conical hills, not in the least like the sand dunes, or the sand-pillars, but springing up at a very steep angle from the sand, long and narrow; some almost touching each other, others separate,

standing up like sentinels on the watch. They varied in height from a little cone like a sand-castle to a huge uprearing cone of some fifty or sixty feet, but that they were more or less permanent was shown by the thick streak of scrubby bush growing on one side of some of the largest, among which were even stunted trees.

It did not take long for the leaders to survey the possibilities of such a place, and decide that water might very likely be found not so far down if they dug for it. Accordingly, having selected the most likely spot, at the foot of one of the largest terrabil, just below the vegetation, they all set to work in turns, even the two women doing their share. The handfuls of sand were at first scooped up and thrown back easily, and as each one fell out exhausted someone else took the place, as only one could work at a time. After twenty minutes they had made a fairly deep hole, and the sand at the bottom was distinctly damp; another half-hour showed actual water. The camels, which had been pawing excitedly near, made themselves such a nuisance that they had to be taken off and tied up.

Dilir got right down into the hole and shovelled the sand up quickly, until he had widened the bottom and disclosed water an inch or two in depth. It filtered in slowly, and at first it was only possible to take up half-a-cupful at a time, but as the cup went round and one after another drank from it, gradually their terrible thirst was assuaged, for the water was cool and sweet, and much more satisfying than the brackish tepid stuff they had lately relied upon. When they had had enough, the women drew off and tried to forget their gnawing hunger, which had

now once again asserted itself, in sleep. The camels were supplied, as the water grew deeper, by the use of the men's helmets, but this process took a long time, and it was some hours before, having set the animals free to browse, the men also flung themselves down where the shadow lay thickest.

Nafeesa awoke an hour or so later, feeling Dilir touch her arm; he held his finger to his lips mysteriously for silence, and beckoned her away round the curve of the hill.

"Isn't there a kind of leaf your people make into soup?" he asked.

"Many leaves."

"Is that one of the right sort?"

Eagerly she seized the specimen he held out and began nodding vigorously. "Where did you get it?"

He pointed up above their heads where the shrubs grew. They scrambled past the camels, who were doing their best to ensure that their progeny became giraffe-like creatures with long necks in accordance with the law of the survival of the fittest, and climbed the steep slope, which was at an angle of at least fifty degrees, hanging on by stumps and twigs until they had worked almost to the summit, where the bush from which Dilir gathered the leaves grew in some abundance. It was called louby, and from it there hung long pods in which, however, the seeds were useless. They collected bundles of the leaves, and then came across a small bush bearing hard and small berries like coriander seed. "Kerkedan" pronounced Dilir.

"Make coffee," cried Nafeesa delightedly, and her delight changed to positive ecstasy a few

minutes later when she pounced on the symka shrub with pods, and opening them disclosed several scarlet grains like beads. Dilir had often seen these seeds used as ornaments by the women, strung in chains on their necks, and also set in the handles of throwing daggers as decorations, but he had no idea they were of any practical use.

"Make oil," Nafeesa told him with a beaming face.

Laden with spoil they descended to the level and soon got a fire going with some of the stripped and thorny bushes, which had scratched them both badly in their descent.

First they ground up the kerkedan seeds and boiled them, making a passable imitation of coffee, and poured the mixture into one of the leathern skins. Next they broke up the bitter leaves into the boiling water, forming a kind of thick soup, full of substance like spinach. Of this they both ate heartily, seeing that the others were not yet awake, and that two pansful would not satisfy the whole party. Then they boiled a fresh supply.

It was poor unsatisfying fare, make-believe at best, but it sufficed these hardy children of the desert for the time.

The sun was very near the horizon when the others awoke, coming back to the knowledge of their hard position, and hardly had they realised it than there was served up to them a mess of spinach soup, and to follow it draughts of coffee-substitute. Thankful as they were to get anything at all, most of the party had some difficulty in swallowing it, but when Dilir assured them it couldn't possibly hurt them they filled the cavity

within. Afterwards it occurred to several of them that now there was plenty of water a satisfying wash would be most refreshing. Nafeesa mashed up her red seeds and produced a queer-looking paste something like crab's inside, and anointed her whole body piecemeal with it in place of washing. She came back from her labours, shining so visibly, that Maurice advised her to make her future line an advertisement of somebody's furniture polish! Yet in the end he was glad enough to borrow some from her as a substitute for soap when he tried to operate on himself with his much-enduring razor. Dilir meantime had set aside such superfluities in favour of more strenuous work, and had cut as much camel-fodder as he could manage while the light lasted.

When he descended from the height, he found Durham waiting for him, and quietly the two men strolled away from the terrabil out of earshot of the rest.

"I resign the leadership to you, Hawk," said Durham. "You are much more fitted for it than I in the present circumstances. What do you command?"

"I have examined all round this place," answered Dilir, "and I have seen marks which there is no mistaking. A large foray party passed a mile to the east a very short time before we came here. They appear to be making for Gergaheit."

"If they did not stop here, they must have been well provided. What direction were they coming from?"

"They came from almost due south."

Their eyes met, and there was no need to put into words what both understood; then Durham suggested an alternative idea.

"Could they have been those raiders we chased?"

"No, there were but fifty of them at the most; here there are more like a hundred. Besides, the others were going due east."

"Well?" asked Durham after a pause.

"I will go to Gergaheit to-night, disguised, and will bring back the provisions from the cache. It is likely I may not meet anyone at all, but the disguise is safer."

"I cannot let you go, Hawk!" Durham's voiced was troubled.

"There is no other way."

"You're certain to get killed."

"But what matter?"

"Matter enough to us."

"No, for if I do not come back you can kill the worst camel, and that will give you meat enough to make for The Bab."

"But you must take a camel?"

"I shall not. The distance is not great; the camels are tired; if I use one, we cannot get on to-morrow, and we must. I shall pretend I am a man who has been robbed if I encounter any of the tribesmen."

"But you have no disguise?"

"I have all. I stripped that dead Arab of all that I need, and as for the make-up that never leaves me." He drew from his shirt-front a small package and looked at it lovingly. "This make-up is very necessary, because if, as I think, they are that German's gang, they would know me at once unless I was disguised."

Durham turned from him, and putting his hands in his coat pockets paced away for about a dozen strides. In his head there rang words

familiar from childhood—"It is expedient that one man should die for the people." It was little less than death to which Dilir wanted to go. The odd chance in his favour was slight indeed. Gladly would Durham have undertaken the venture himself, but that of course would be impossible, he could not be disguised, and even if he could he did not know where the cache was. It did not really require much decision, because his level-headedness told him it was the only way. If Dilir succeeded, they would have enough food to start off for their last desperate throw for safety. If he did not return, they could kill the camel and make provision for the journey of its dried flesh. The two remaining animals would be well able to carry the women and the water, and two of the men riding by turns. No, it was not so much a question of decision as of consent, and that he could not withhold.

"It is expedient that one man should die for the people." It was as if the very words had been murmured to him by the little cold night wind that stirred over the plain. He wheeled where he stood and held out his hand.

"Go, and may Allah guard thee!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE HAWK STRIKES

Not far from the bleak range of basalt hills which was cut by The Bab lay the ruined village of Gergaheit. It had been built by the miners, who in ancient times searched for gold in the great wilderness of the Atbai and found it too. Its former owners were forgotten, even their name was unknown, but their works remained. The desolate heaps of mud-houses, forming streets all out of alignment, after the fashion of Egyptian villages to this day, sprawled down the side of a small valley and climbed the hither side, spreading out on to the flat ground above. Here the houses were larger and better fashioned, or had been, for all was now gaping desolation. Some of them were built of stone, and stood square and plumb like real mason's work instead of resembling the crude models of a child's fingers, as in the Nile villages. In the midst of the better quarter was the familiar open space or *sûk*, where the men could congregate and gossip and chaffer. But long since the place had been left to the rats and lizards, who romped through the empty floors as through a ballroom, and chased each other squeaking along the winding tracks. Some of the houses were merely heaps of mud-brick or stone, others stood entire except for the roof, but one or two

were fairly habitable. Though no one lived here, the village was well known among the tribes, and formed a frequent camping-place for those who wandered by desert ways. For here they could get water and could find shelter from the blast of the cold night winds behind the crumbling walls.

The moon had not yet risen, but the glow that rose from out the irregular circuit of the black and gaping walls of Gergaheit showed that the place was habited to-night. The party occupying it was obviously large and of great strength, for they allowed their fires to throw their flames leaping upward to the heavens and raised their voices in a confused babel of shouting sound, that showed they feared no intruder. One such intruder advanced over the sand with the steady unresting step of a man well used to walking on sand. He was shod in sandals, and wore, not a cloth bound turban-wise as the Bisharein themselves do when they wear anything on their heads, but a sort of Arab *haik* caught round the forehead with a twist of camel's-hair rope. He was swathed in the many folds of a Bisharein garment, made of the kind of thick cottony cloth called *damour*, which was at one time the universal fabric for the clothing of all the tribes. As he approached the outer wall of the once prosperous village, he stopped and scanned it keenly east and west. The features were prominent and not likely to be forgotten. Some of the houses were actually part of the wall, built on to it from the inside. These showed like broken teeth, while a huge hole made by the complete landslide of one of them was as a gap in the giant gums.

Dilir took his bearings, and without hesitation

went to a corner below the wall of one of the ruined houses; after a few minutes' groping, he rested both hands on an enormous stone, and exerting all his physical strength moved it a little. Again putting forth his utmost strength in the pushing force which is stronger than the pull, he gradually got it out of the way, revealing a hole beneath. Into this he thrust his arm, up to the shoulder, lying full length on the ground to do so, and drew forth, first a fat goat-skin filled with liquid, then a stout stick, such as every man in the desert not armed with lance or spear has always in or by his hand. Such sticks are called *selamés* from the wood of a certain kind of acacia from which they are made—the sellam. They are usually three feet in length and the thickness of a man's thumb. The top is bent over in the fire while still green, and the stick is well seasoned and soaked in grease, and generally given as much attention as might be bestowed upon a favourite cricket-bat. When well done, it makes a powerful weapon, strong with a kind of tough elasticity that prevents its breaking from the hardest stroke. There were leather bags also in the hole, filled with some kind of provisions, but for the present Dilir selected only one small one, though he undid the mouth of another, and thrusting in his hand drew out a handful of dates and grain, before he fastened it up again and sat up watchful and on the alert. There was nothing to show he had been observed. The light from the red fires still flickered up into the immense vault of space, and the men continued their confused whining cries. He replaced the stone and then sat down, breathing hard. The larger skin was full of *bouza*, the fermented liquor much

esteemed by the Arabs. Dilir was abstemious, but the call to be made on his already sorely tried strength was immense, and he dare neglect no precautions to increase his reserve of vitality, so he tipped up the skin and sucked a few mouthfuls, which set the blood ringing in his veins and for the moment blinded his eyes and obscured his brain, dazed by the potency of the liquor.

He had not the slightest intention of leaving off the adventure until he had extracted from it the last ounce of thrill. To him the mystery of danger called as drink or passion call to other kinds of men, he simply could not resist it. To collect his belongings and go back to the camp by the terrabil had never been his intention; he meant to go into Gergaheit to see for himself if the German were there and try to discover his plans. For this reason alone he had made himself up with such care that he looked a full-faced Arab of the better merchant sort like what he was when Maurice had set eyes on him first. But he never made up the white paste which he moulded over his face quite alike twice, and this time he had drawn his narrow eyes up and down, and so fixed them that he gave the impression of a large-eyed rather simple sort of man.

He munched the dates and grain with what ease he could, under his stiff face mask, and conned over his next move. It did not take him long. With the skin of *bouza* on his shoulder, the *selamé* in his right hand, and the small bag which contained *tittun*, the native tobacco, in his left, he made a wide circuit of the village, so as to enter from the east and not from the south, and then walked swiftly and without indecision along the uneven narrow ways, where a cur yelped at him, a rat

darted across almost between his feet, and the dark shadow of a woman cowered back in a black gap. He met no one, no man that is to say, for all the men were engaged in that most popular diversion of bolstering up their own vanity at the expense of their fellows, in the *sûk* or market-place. Here also were the fires and the noise.

When Dilir arrived there, he marked an open place in the irregular circle on the ground, and walking straight toward it across the open ground stood there beside it with the usual Arab salutation, until the man next him with a slight movement bade him be seated. There had been an instant silence when he was noticed, for though such a company had no fear of anything a single stranger might do, their curiosity was at all times vividly alive, and their mental food was wholly of such incidents, just as the mental food of the old lady who sits at the front window of her small house the livelong day is solely of the comings and goings of her neighbours.

It was a weird and effective scene. The leaping splendour of the flames fell on the browns and yellows of the men's faces and clothes, and showed them all carelessly at ease in every imaginable posture, with their sinewy arms and deep twinkling eyes telling of the strength and shrewdness that lay beneath this apparent carelessness. Some were eating, some were playing an odd kind of draughts with the squares marked in the dust and animal pellets for pieces. Many were smoking the deep-mouthed native pipes. It was the food that attracted Dilir most, for in spite of his hasty handful he was very hungry, so he eyed his neighbours. One near him had several flat cakes of the thin baked kind, on which he was pouring honey,

some of the others had a mess of lentils, but one quite near had risen to Epicurean heights in pouring a kind of onion sauce, hot and steaming, over his wooden platter of cooked beans. Dilir kept his eye on him. Some of those within easy reach of him began asking him questions with an air of indifference as if the answers were of no consequence. "Whence had he come? Was he all alone?" and so on. He answered in Arabic quite readily, though without undue elaboration. He was a trader in *bouza* and tobacco—for well he knew that though Mohammedans in name these desert dwellers care nothing for the injunctions of the Prophet. The dark eyes around glistened and the whole circle seemed instinctively to sway a little nearer to him. His camel had crossed its legs and broken one some miles away, out there in the desert. He had taken from her such of his wares as he could carry, and guided by the glare of the fires, had made his way here—so he said.

"Canst speak Bisharein?"

"I have but a word of that tongue here and there," Dilir replied, hoping that they would use it freely to his advantage.

Well did he know these men! Some of them certainly were Koatil, others from one of the smaller tribes, but he did not see any which, from the small peculiarities in their dress, he could recognise as Mallak. As he had expected, the men presently began to speak to each other in Bisharein aside. "Is that his *bouza*?" one asked, eyeing the fat skin. "What is there to prevent our taking it? Ay, and the tobacco too in the smaller bag—we could send him forth with a slit neck to keep his camel company."

A man who seemed to be a leader or sheikh,

asked Dilir several searching questions as to the way he had come, the time he had taken and so on, all of which he answered shortly and without difficulty. Presently, judging the moment had come, Dilir opened his small bag, and taking thence some of the much-desired tobacco in the palm of his hand, proceeded to a bargain with the man whose fragrant onion sauce rose so temptingly to his nostrils. The man was a keen trader, and some time elapsed before he signified he was satisfied with the amount offered, and only then because Dilir cast a careless glance on the dish of lentils two or three removes away on his right. The bargain concluded, the Bishary drew his filthy forefinger across the wooden platter, dividing the mess into two halves fairly evenly, and turned the one side for which Dilir had been chaffering toward him. Greedily the half-famished Pathan began stuffing it into his mouth with his fingers, but he had hardly gulped up his share before a low growl arose from an immense Arab on one side of the circle, who rose up, saying, "He has tobacco; let us take it from him! And *bouza*, which we will have to drink." Dilir continued clearing up his side of the platter to the last smear without turning or altering his position, but with a watchful eye he noted the bully leave his place and come behind him. Just as the man's greedy hand stretched out to grasp the bag, with a single backward movement of the wrist Dilir struck his arm with tremendous force with the *sclamé* just at the elbow, and sent him springing away, holding his arm and spitting out curses. In the sudden silence that followed the Pathan rose.

"Friends," he said, "I come alone among you, I, a man in misfortune, whom Allah and the Pro-

phet have specially commended to your hospitality. Moreover, I have eaten of your 'bread and salt' and am one with you. Is it well that I should be treated as one who has fallen among thieves?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, and some of those who had risen sank down again. The fellow with the bad arm reeled off and lay down in a dark corner. But another courteously held out a water-skin from which the stranger could rinse his fingers. This done Dilir went on, "The tobacco will I sell for food, and when it is sold then will I give a drink of the *bouza* to whoever has bought my tobacco."

The idea of getting something for nothing appeals to the heart of desert wanderer as much as to the careful housewife, and there was a general laugh at the proposition. There was no lack of customers, and for the next half-hour Dilir was busily holding his own, and chaffering and chaffing with a mixture of wit and acumen that appealed dearly to these children of the wild. Soon he had a goodly pile of dates, lentils and maize lying by his side, and accepted a piece of *damour* as purchase money in order to tie them up. To a novice, these men with their sharp straight faces and bushy hair, might have appeared as much alike as a flock of sheep, but it was not by the possession of only common qualities that Dilir had achieved his unique position in the Secret Service. Though he appeared hardly to look, he knew well each man who bought from him, and when he turned to the *bouza* and poured a little into a gourd, handed to him for the purpose, he saw a surly-looking bully edge forward and thrust his pannikin out, and knew that he had not paid for the privilege.

"Thou hast not bought,"[2] he said coolly, handing the gourd to another, who sipped it in ecstasy.

"All the same I will have of thy *bouza*," hectored the bully. "And if thou wilt not give it to me I will spill it all on the ground."

Dilir, still seated, looked up at him with a swift rejoinder, unprintable here, but so acceptable to the audience, that those who heard it roared with enjoyment and repeated it until it echoed and rippled to the farthest confines of the circle, and as the bully, discomfited, withdrew as fast as he could, variations of the jest from his own friends went ringing after him into the night.

The noise had attracted someone else from one of the largest and best built of the remaining stone houses on the level ground, and from the end of one of the tumble-down streets or lanes facing Dilir, emerged the slight figure for whom the Pathan had been watching with the keenness of his namesake the hawk. Thies, dressed in a riding suit of khaki-coloured stuff, was smoking, as was his habit, a big cigar. He looked very slight and young as he came forward slowly into the red leaping firelight, and then he stopped altogether as Dilir rose to his feet with a gesture of the wildest amazement, as if he had seen a ghost. He pointed with every appearance of fear and stuttered, "But here is a European."

"Hast committed a murder that thou durst not face a European?" Thies asked sharply without moving from where he stood, looking with the sternest aspect he could assume on this unexpected stranger. His experience had taught him to be deadly suspicious of strangers, and at the very first sight of the man, his thoughts had leapt to that little hunted party in the wilderness.

around whom he had drawn his cords. He had never lost touch with them, but had known where they were the whole time since they had left Terfaui. They were still entangled by the desert, and so long as there was any chance of their managing to die by their own lack of provision or experience he had withheld his hand. For then at no future time could the charge of blood-guilt be levelled at his head; but of one thing he was grimly determined, not one among them should escape alive! His ideas did not stop short at Durham now, they embraced all, down to the most helpless one among them who could bleat out a tale of woe. That this miserable little band must make for The Bab, since they had not gone back to Murrat, Thies knew as well as Dilir himself, and so directly he received news through his spies that they had left Telat Abda he prepared to receive them.

The sheikh of the Koatil was entirely bound to him now, no less by terror than by cupidity, for he knew well what punishment would be likely to fall on him for his complicity did any of the little party of English escape to tell the tale of their ruthless handling.

Though uneasily conscious that he had not quite got the measure of Durham, Thies had the real German's contempt for the brains of those pitted against him; he pictured the party lulled into security by the lack of attack, imagining they had got beyond the reach of their foe's arm, so that they would come plodding along on spent camels, probably in broad daylight, up to the threshold of the great gate, forming an easy mark, indeed, for the tribesmen secreted up above in the niches of the rocks. So he had selected one or

two of the best marksmen, those who had already used firearms, and delighted their very souls by the present of the latest pattern rifles. They had required a little practice to master these weapons, but that had been easily given them in the tedious days that had elapsed since the escape of the doomed ones from Terfaui, and Thies had no fear that they would fail, knowing that their retaining possession of the weapons was contingent on their success. It was regrettable that this clumsy method of bloodshed should have to be resorted to; the British always howled resonantly round the world when any of their nation were killed. Blood left a mark that was not easy to get rid of, but in any case, even the worst, the vengeance, when it did come, would fall on his allies the natives. That in itself was a pity, not because he cared twopence what became of them, but because such dire punishment as they might receive might well revive in them a holy terror of the British, which it ought to be the prerogative only of his own nation to inspire! It was therefore most unfortunate that it had come to this, and Thies felt exceedingly out of humour. If only those clumsy blundering fools had consented to be quietly overwhelmed through lack of water in the nice clean sands of the desert, it would have been so much more comfortable all round. There was a factor which had prevented that most desirable conclusion to the affair, and well he knew what it was! There was a man who worked for the British as he worked for Germany, a Secret Service man, whose traces Thies had occasionally crossed. He knew very little about him—Dilir had taken care of that—and he thought slightingly of him, because once or twice, in small ways, he

had imagined he had detected small blunders made by this unknown in covering up his tracks—Dilir had also taken care of that because he wished just such an impression to be produced. However, this man certainly had some knowledge of the desert, it had been he who had contrived the escape from Terfaui, and he was still with the victims. There could be no doubt at all that if he had not taken this unwelcome hand in the game, that detestable little party would have been sweetly sleeping beneath the sand.

Therefore the very instant he set eyes on Dilir Thies was on his guard. He hardly believed any spy would dare to come openly into such a hostile camp, that was not the German way of doing things, and, for all his long years of experience Thies had never eradicated the German trait of looking at things entirely from his own standpoint. His idea was, that this was some genuine native, bribed by the arch-enemy to pick up information. This did not bother him at all, because he had taken good care the natives should not give any information, for the very good reason they had none to give. The plans for the morrow he supposed lay safely locked in his own head. But he little knew the native subtilty, or the species of wireless telegraphy that goes on in the desert! These Bisharein knew quite well something of the orders of the day to come, and had already indefinitely referred to them, in a way which had been quite sufficient for shrewd Dilir.

When Thies put his sharp question, Dilir stood up and salaamed with both hands to his forehead, very respectfully, and remained standing, so Thies, confident in himself, and interested in outwitting this tyro, drew nearer. He studied the man

carefully, and judged him to be rather of kinship with the tribes by the borders of the Red Sea, than any in the immediate vicinity, and presently he inquired of those seated around what account the fellow gave of himself.

"Ask him himself, he hath a tongue," they replied surlily.

So Thies repeated his question to the stranger in very good Arabic. Dilir replied, in the same tongue, that he had come selling tobacco, and that he had sold all but one handful reserved for his own use, but that if he had known a European was here he would have kept some. Even now he would offer him his last cherished morsel. He held out his hand hesitatingly, as if he expected to be refused, and Thies was indeed about to wave it back in a lordly way, when he noticed that there was a scrap of white paper mixed in with the tobacco. He looked at the seller and met his eyes with a questioning meaning look fixed on him, and instantly his first theory was overturned—here apparently was someone with a message for him. His curiosity was further aroused, and if this were a trick it would be very easily seen through!

So he accepted the handful of tobacco, dropping a coin in exchange into the hollow of the man's outstretched hands, then, nodding carelessly, he withdrew with his tobacco and the paper, and the stranger squatted humbly down again.

In an even shorter time than Dilir had set himself to wait, Thies appeared again from the corner of the street leading to the house he occupied. Several of the tribesmen by this time had fallen asleep in various attitudes, rolled up in their cloaks, and Dilir himself had pretended to follow

their example. But Thies came round to him without any pretence or feint and stood beside him.

"You can read what is written on that paper?" he asked, speaking in German very fast, and not exhibiting the paper or making any gesture by which his meaning might be interpreted by those ignorant of the language.

"I can not only read it, but I can tell you much of the matter that does not appear on the paper," Dilir returned in a low voice in excellent German.

Thies was still very much on his guard, but the sound of his native tongue sang in his heart; he glanced to right and left. "You can speak freely, none of these swine understand that glorious language," he said contemptuously. Dilir had risen and began to draw a little away from the slumbering or drowsy circle.

"I have come with a message for you," he said in the glorious language. "But I pretended to be surprised at seeing you because I did not know whether you would wish that fact to be known."

"And the message?"

"As it is written in German on that paper, the two thousand rifles have now arrived at Suakin; that is all that the paper says, but there is more, much more, confided to me by word of mouth alone. It is not well to put too much on paper in this land of savages, even though it be written in the most civilised of tongues;" He lowered his voice still more, and approaching close to Thies, said with the utmost impressiveness, "The rifles have safely passed the Customs under the guise of bedsteads, and are now in the godown of Abdul Nariz."

"Bedsteads!" echoed the German incredulously.

"Bedsteads," repeated Dilir gravely, "bedsteads in parts, made so that they can be easily transported when necessary and fitted together eventually." He spoke as if it were the most ordinary transaction in the world to import iron bedsteads in parts to be screwed together, into a land where the Europeans who could use them were as scarce as the wells in the desert, while the myriad natives, if they used anything at all, desired nothing better than the wooden string-laced angareygs used by their fathers and their fathers' fathers. Dilir was an artist in his profession, and a flourish like that was simply irresistible to him. He could easily have chosen for his purpose some sort of hardware which would have equally served to cover up rifles packed in crates, and been a much more probable import, but he scorned such mildness.

His quiet conviction of tone, and above all his delightful home-bred accent, which fell on the German's ear with the pleasant tinkle of dripping water to a thirsty man, convinced Thies, and he laughed suddenly. "Bedsteads!" he cried. "Ha! These dunder-headed English, they cannot see what is under their noses! So the Customs passed the crates of 'bedsteads,' hey?"

"Abdul Nariz holds them safely, awaiting your orders."

As they had talked, they had sauntered away from the bundles of unsavoury clothes humped around the fires, and had drawn near to the small alley from which Thies had first emerged. Thies' heart had warmed toward this German-speaking messenger; he began to believe he had

indeed lighted upon a countryman, a civilised being; no native could have spoken German like that, still less an Englishman, for though, here and there, was found an Englishman, who had condescended to learn the leading language of the world, they were all notoriously incapable of mastering the rich accent that distinguished the glorious tongue. He was not going to ask if this stranger were a countryman, that must come out gradually; to betray uncertainty by such a question would be to confess he was not the consummate judge he professed to be, but he revelled in the treat of speaking his own language, and, though still on his guard, had no desire to end the interview.

"How did you find me?" he asked at last.

Dilir gave a rapid sketch of an imaginary journey from Suakin, detailing how he had first made his way to Terfaui, according to instructions, from the man, a German, who was managing the matter under cover of Abdul Nariz' trade, and that when he had found Thies had left there he had followed him on across the desert.

"German-Jew," said Thies to himself, certain that he had now solved the problem satisfactorily. That would account for the hook-nose, the dark eyes and physiognomy of this wayfarer and also for his accent. No doubt the man had lived years under the paternal government in the beloved country!

"What else have you to tell me?" he asked.

"I heard some story at Terfaui of a party of English entrapped and overwhelmed in the desert. I wish to hear no more of that, it is no concern of mine, and it is not well to meddle with such things where these devil-English are involved. My errand

is done, Herr Captain, and that is all. I have earned the reward promised me on my return to Suakin with a note from you as a guarantee of faithful performance, and when you have given me that I will rest an hour or two and start with the late remnant of moon which lingers in the sky."

"The note you shall have certainly. As for the rifles, they must remain where they are at present."

Without hesitation Thies indicated the way along the narrow passage, until they reached a rather large stone-built house which he was temporarily occupying. It was poor enough certainly, but the four walls were standing and were sufficiently roofed. Thies had no personal fear of any one man, for he was armed with a revolver ready to hand in case of any treacherous attempt. Though by this time he was convinced of his visitor's *bona fides*, he had no intention of running any risks. Dilir's disclaimer of any wish to know his plans in regard to the English had given him an additional touch of evidence that he was what he professed to be. Thies had had no intention whatever of confiding in him in any case, but it was satisfactory that the man had not attempted indirectly to extract any information.

He drew aside to let Dilir pass in first, always a useful precaution, and Dilir entered without the least hesitation, though he well knew that if his host had gained the smallest glimmering of his identity he would have had no time to think before the ready bullet sped through his brain! Such risks were all in the day's work!

The house was higher than most, though, of course, only of one story. It was divided into

two rooms, each about twelve feet square and separated by a partition of mud-bricks. By the omission of a few of these in the centre of the partition-wall a little window had been formed in which stood a small oil-lamp without a chimney, which thus smokily lighted both compartments. A small opening led from one room to the other. In the outer one were piled up some saddle-bags and cloaks and other gear, with a camel-saddle and water-skins, and one or two of the small wooden stools the natives use as pillows or to rest their sides on when they recline on the ground. Once inside Thies slipped past his guest and wheeled round with his back to the light, which fell full on Dilir's face.

"Your disguise is perfect," he said warmly, after scrutinising him.

"If you find it so, Herr Captain, it must be good indeed," replied Dilir smoothly, speaking always in fluent German.

"I have still one bottle of real Rhine wine left," continued Thies. "And it has warmed my heart to hear again the accent of civilisation in this oppressed and benighted land. I shall crack it with you, Herr——?" He paused and looked interrogative.

"In the profession to which you and I belong, it is not well to mention names," replied Dilir, standing serenely in front of the light.

"So be it, you are right, then I shall pledge you only as a friend." Thies kept his face always toward Dilir, while he drew out a bottle from his store, and signed to the latter to reach down two wooden cups standing in a high niche. Thies drew the cork while Dilir was so occupied, standing with his back to him, and dusting out the cups with a

corner of his garment. When he turned again, he held a cup in each hand and Thies filled them, after which he set the bottle down in a corner and took a cup himself.

"Deutschland über alles!" he cried, off his guard for the first second since he had met the stranger—for the cup was in his right hand.

It was the last word he spoke on earth. With a movement quicker than the tongue of a lizard on a fly, Dilir had flung the contents of his cup full in his face, blinding him for a second, and the hand that dropped the cup and snatched at the revolver was gripped in fingers like the teeth of a steel-trap. Before the wretched German could open his mouth to shout, a native garment was around his face and head, smothering him in its malodorous folds, he was tripped by a foot behind his heels, and measured his length on the ground, his head catching the hard mud with a resounding thump. There followed a few deadly minutes of tense strain, when sinew cracked against sinew, and muscle against muscle, in the striving of the men for dear life. But though Thies was in good condition and wiry enough, he would have been no match for Dilir even on equal terms, and this time he was at a great disadvantage. Presently he lay, mummy fashion, with his arms bound straight along his sides with his own camel-ropes and his legs stretched out and roped together. He had been able to utter no cry for help, while every ounce of his strength was required for his desperate resistance, and even if he had it would have been smothered in the choking folds of the yards of *damour* around his head.

When at last he was trussed up, Dilir knelt beside him in quiet satisfaction, and stuffed the folds of

the garment mercilessly far back into his mouth with strong sinewy fingers, then he neatly turned back the excess of the stuff above the mouth, leaving the nose and eyes uncovered, and tied it round at the back of the head to hold the wad in place. Next he took possession of the revolver and transferred it, and all the cartridges he could find, to his own person, revealing as he did so to the glaring eyes of his prey the fact that he wore English-made breeches and shirt of khaki underneath his flowing garment. The piece of stuff he had used for his purpose was that he had carried around the shoulders loosely, and he was still fully enveloped in the native cloth from head to foot. Once more he bent over Thies, and by placing his hand beneath the nostrils, satisfied himself that the man could breathe freely; then picking him up like a log of wood, he carried him through into the inner room. Here he set him on his feet, propping him in an upright position in an angle of the wall, and sitting down on the native angareyg, which stood along the side of the opposite wall, began very quietly:

"We will now speak in English, Herr Captain, for it is the language I prefer; though I am a Pathan, yet I am British to the heart and the soul. You are going to die, Herr Captain, just as soon as I have finished speaking to you, but I am not going to shoot you with your own revolver. That would no doubt be the best death for you, for it is the death of a man, but it might bring people here to see what made the noise, and I do not want any interference. So you see I shall have to use another method."

He took out from its sheath in his belt underneath the robe a long keen-bladed knife, and

crossing the room to Thies showed it to him in the light of the lamp which illuminated this compartment also from the little window in the partition. He saw the man's eyes wild with terror as he approached, and he fell back a step.

"No, not quite yet," he said. Then advancing again he opened the German's loose shirt above the cords that secured his arms below the elbow, and feeling for a moment placed his dry fingers on the heart against the flesh, feeling the quick agonised pumping of the blood. "I shall bury the knife in *there*," he said, pressing a little with his hard finger-tips. "I shall go deep, you will feel nothing."

Then he returned to his seat on the bed. "I do not want you to tell me anything," he continued, "for I know all that I need as to your plans from the talk of your hired men out there, but what I do not know, and what you cannot tell me, is what they will do when your leadership is lost to them. It is not an easy thing to judge with these wild people. It is no small responsibility on you that you have aroused the blood-lust in them against their rulers and whetted them as a man whets a knife on a stone. They go mad, this people, and in their madness they run amuck, and then it is not in the power of a handful of men to stop them. Therefore, instead of asking you what you think will happen, I will give you some information of things that may interest you, which it can do no more harm for you to know now. Long have you wished to know me, and always have I baffled you; my identity, the identity of the man who crossed your tracks was hidden from you, behold I introduce him. I am Captain Dilir Khan of the Indian Army and the British Secret

Service; you met me in a Cairo hotel one time, and we spent part of a day together, but as you were a German you had some difficulty in concealing your disgust for a native, and your marvel that the English should permit such people on an equality with them and to be trusted." He noticed the spark of added horror and resentment that leaped into the German's eyes, which had seemed to grow paler-coloured under the influence of mortal fear.

"You knew," Dilir continued, "that there was someone who came about among the wild tribes of the desert, even as you did, and that sometimes even your best-laid plans seemed not to go smoothly, but you could never find out who that mole was who dug deeper than you, mine and counter-mine, as in warfare. At times this made you uneasy, but you had a good estimate of yourself, and you did not much mind, for you said in your heart I have sown a good crop of discontent and fury in the hearts of the dwellers in the wilderness. I will arm them with modern rifles, nominally as a reward for helping me to get rid of Bimbashi Durham, who is an obstacle to my plans, for he is a clear-sighted man among a nation of dunder-heads. And you were satisfied to believe that those rifles would serve a double purpose, for you knew, as I know, and all who work beneath the surface in connection with your cursed land know, that the time is not far off when Germany will burst forth, disguised no longer under a meek-seeming spirit, to ravage and tear at those nations who she considers block her path. You said to yourself in glee, 'When The Day comes, then the harvest of red blood I have sown will be reaped, for the

natives will sweep to the towns, and with the new rifles I have given them will they mow down in swathes the bodies of the white people, the men and the women and the little children.'

"But, Herr Captain, I knew of this too, and as luck would have it I fell in, not quite by accident" —Dilir's get-up permitted but a faint approach to his charming smile—"with the messenger who brought you news of your rifles to be landed at Suakin. He was not a German, but a mongrel native, and he carried a letter for you in German from that friend of yours in Suakin; that letter, a part of which you have seen, I took from that messenger because he did not any longer require letters or rewards, or anything of that sort. I read it myself, being well skilled in your tongue, and it said nothing at all about bedsteads or about rifles having safely passed the Customs because of the stupidity of the dolt-heads of English officials; on the contrary, it said that the rifles had indeed been consigned to Abdul Nariz as hardware of a useful and probable sort, but the Customs' officers had not merely looked at the tops of the crates and then been satisfied to charge by weight, but had been as thorough as even Germans could have been, and had discovered all those rifles, and he, Abdul Nariz, was in a very difficult position, though he was choking himself by his swearings of innocence. So I cut off a strip of that letter, the beginning bit, which served my purpose, and had the address of your German friend at the top, and I gave it to you, and it read very well, just as if the rifles had arrived to the number of two thousand.

"This has been rather a long story, Herr Captain, and my time is valuable, but I have told it you

for a purpose. I might have done what must be done quickly, and so spared you something, but I had always in my mind that day when you tied the eagle-eyed Bimbashi to a tree to be shamed before the people. I have indeed no time or means to keep you tied hour after hour under a hot sun, tormented by flies and thirst, not knowing whether death may not be very near, so I could only do my best.

"However, though I have held you tied up but a very little time, yet it has been sharp, and I doubt not you have suffered more than he did, for you are not by nature as the lion-hearted Bimbashi.

"And now you must die because I have no more time to waste with you. You know well why that sentence is passed upon you, not altogether because you are a spy, I blame you not for that. I also am a spy, and for the man whose blood runs red in his veins there are moments well worth having to be found along that road, and always death is very familiar, walking close at hand, and making all that must be done worth while to do. No, not altogether a spy, for our countries are not already at war, but you must die because you planned the death of a man nobler than yourself, and you would also have killed with him in one swoop all those who were with him, but you have failed, you have fallen into the hands of a stronger than yourself."

He got up.

The German's face was as that of a man already dead. His skin was putty colour and his nostrils had fallen in. As Dilir approached, he swayed to one side, stiff in his trappings, and would have fallen prone, but that Dilir caught him by the

right arm with his left hand, and raising his right arm high, he drove home the blade with a deadly surety. The sudden swing of his draperies made a wind through the room and the lamp blew out.

In silence and darkness he laid the German down alongside the wall, then drawing forth the blade he wiped it carefully on his vanquished opponent's clothes.

Striding into the front room, now in total darkness, he laid his hand unerringly on the bag of food he had put down at his entrance, and went out.

CHAPTER XVII

AN EVEN CHANCE

DILIR'S venture was concealed from the two women without difficulty, for, listless from lack of food, they settled down together very early, curled up at the base of a large terrabil. It was necessary, seeing that the numbers of the party were reduced, that Pentland should do the share of watch-keeping he had hitherto been allowed to shirk. Durham always felt a great reluctance to giving him orders, but he overcame it, and suggested, in a dry manner, that he should take his turn. Pentland assented without the least demur, and was told off for the early morning hours before the dawn.

When he had been aroused and instructed as to his duties, only then at last did Durham himself drop off to sleep; for the whole of the previous time, during Maurice's watch as well as his own, his mind had been too heavy with anxiety for his friend to allow him any mental rest. He had suffered dumbly, but Maurice understood and sympathised.

Though he fell asleep so late, Durham was the first to awake the next morning just as the clear light began to reveal the infinite depths of the sky-space overhead. He roused himself with some difficulty, and looking round saw on one side of him, not many yards off, Edgar Pentland

shamelessly asleep beneath the shelter of a terrabil, and on the other the figure of a nomad strangely "spread," lying face downwards on the sand.

For the first fumbling moments while reason strove to free itself from the mists of unconsciousness, a horrible doubt as to what had happened enveloped Durham, but very quickly he realised that this could be none but Dilir. Stepping across he put a hand on the shoulder of the Pathan, whose usual sleep was so light that it broke at the footfall of a jackal, but this dead stupor of utter exhaustion failed to yield even to a strong pressure. The light was growing every moment sharper, and as Durham rolled the man over and raised the head-covering he gave a hard-wrung exclamation of dismay, for there, where the face should have been, was nothing but a raw-red gaping mask! The whole of the left cheek seemed one ghastly wound scored by deeper gashes. Horror unspeakable seized Durham, who was no stranger to the mutilations practised by the Arabs when they choose, but as the inert figure rolled back on its side, something fell from the face on to the sand, and a wave of immense relief flooded the watcher. The face was scarred indeed, but not mutilated, only inflamed and gashed across by the adhesion of the plaster mask to the skin. It was evident that Dilir, utterly played out, had fallen as he was on his return, and during the night, even in his unconsciousness, had torn and scratched at the torturing mask which had disguised his face, and pulled away half of it with some of the skin too.

It was necessary to wake him now. With the utmost gentleness Durham took the nerveless hand in his own, and by alternate pressure and

release gradually aroused consciousness. Dilir fumbled at his face and fingered the half-peeled mask, then tried to grin, but succeeded only in making a ghastly contortion which brought the water to his eyes and caused Durham to turn away with a gulp in his throat. He quickly recovered himself.

"The others will soon be waking," he said. He asked no questions, seeing that Dilir was quite incapable of answering. "They mustn't see you like this. Go in between the terrabil yonder, those three standing together, and I will bring your things to you."

Dilir pressed his fingers in response, and throwing the head-cloth around him strolled off.

Durham attempted to raise the bags he had brought, and found that even to lift them required the utmost exertion of his strength, and yet the Pathan, with his cracked and agonising face, had carried them for two hours across the desert!

The fact that he was back in safety under any conditions had melted the lump of lead that had lain at Durham's heart, and it was a very cheerful leader who greeted the rest as they gathered around him. He took no notice of Edgar's breach of trust, but gave his brief explanations and commands without regarding him. Yes, Dilir had been off in the night and had brought back food for them all, and had now gone to clean himself up, he said. He showed Maurice and the women what to cook for breakfast, and saw that they got a fire alight. Then he collected Dilir's belongings, and, with a large handful of red paste on a leaf contributed by Nafeesa, made his way to the Pathan.

Even in the blackest moments Durham inspired

confidence in those near him; he had many faults, but weakness was not among them; he never lost his balance under accumulated misfortune, never shifted his burdens on to another's shoulders, but was ever a tower of strength. And now that his heart was lightened, he diffused abroad an almost radiant atmosphere of cheerfulness, and it was an inspired party he left behind him. The fire was soon crackling, the water bubbling in the pot, the meal simmering, and the half-famished watchers deadened the gnawing pangs by nibbling uncooked grain until the porridge was ready.

Meantime in the little cup or hollow between three terrabil, Dilir, having thrown aside his Arab draperies, lay full length on his back with his head between Durham's knees and his scarred face upturned to the sky. Durham, leaning over him, smoothed each dab of paste in the palm of his left hand to free it from roughnesses before he rubbed it over the wounds and into the cracks of that broken skin. His large blunt-tipped fingers moved with extraordinary delicacy in the horrible task of cleansing those gashes, and removing the remainder of the sticky plaster which adhered still to the right cheek. It was most difficult work, and even at the best it could not fail to be torture to the patient, but Dilir lay easily, his long brown hands resting lightly on the ground on each side of him, unclenched. Only once he winced, and Durham had to shake his own head impatiently aside to get rid of the water that brimmed up into his wide-open eyes. The expression of compassion in them would have startled those of his critics who denounced him as harsh and unfeeling!

"I can't conceive how your face got into such a mess," Durham said earnestly, as he worked the paste into the cracks and broken skin. "It doesn't usually cut you up like this, old chap, when you make up, does it?"

Dilir's stiff lips moved with difficulty. "My face was in a bad condition to start with," he explained, "and I had no cream. It melts. I did use some of that stuff, but it's not the same."

"Holy Allah! What you must have suffered, man!"

A shadow fell across between the sand-hills, and Maurice appeared, carrying a pan of boiling meal-porridge.

"I've brought you some provender," he began, then stopped horror-stricken at what he saw. "Have those devils cut him up?" he asked in dismay.

Durham smiled. "No, he'll be all right; face a bit chipped and cracked by the adhesion of that stuff he puts on. Leave that porridge—thanks. Bring a water-skin. Then see that all the other skins are filled, camels watered, gear packed. Keep the others off—this job will take some time."

Temple saluted and withdrew hastily; the horror of that sight had caused such violent spasms to rise in him that they were with difficulty controlled. When out of sight, he reeled against the nearest sand-bank, telling himself angrily that he was no weakling, and that it was only the effect of a hasty meal on a peculiarly empty stomach that had made him liable to be so easily upset.

He had left a spoon in the porridge, and when Durham had at last finished his task, he possessed himself of the still hot mess and passed it to his

patient. "Go ahead. I must wash," he said, and when Dilir would not, he threatened that he would feed him like a baby otherwise. "You will take some time to get it down with a face like that," he argued. "It won't take me long." And he began to cleanse his hands thoroughly with the water Maurice had brought, scouring them with the sand.

Dilir was soon satisfied, and when it was clear he really did not want any more, Durham, who was famished, finished the rest in a few moments, and then felt he had hardly begun. Dilir could talk more easily now. "Thies is dead," he said shortly, as he pulled on his boots and leggings. "I killed him," and his hand stole to the long-bladed knife at his side with a significant gesture.

For a second Durham ceased all movement as if turned to stone. "That was my job," he said at last, speaking from far down in his throat, as he did when greatly moved.

"The opportunity came," the Pathan went on, almost apologetically, and then with a sudden recollection, "But I wouldn't have given it up, no, not for anything, not even to you." There was deep exultation in his voice.

"Tell me."

In short phrases Dilir gave a very sketchy version of what had happened, omitting his exordium at the end. He had not previously spoken of the letter he had intercepted, and Durham was alive with interest. He asked several questions, and at the end nodded his head gravely. "You meant to go into the camp before ever you started!" he said accusingly.

"Who could resist it?"

"Not you certainly," with a smile, then as his

eyes rested lovingly on the poor scarred face, his tone changed. "It has cost you something, old man."

"I was glad to do it."

"Those bags—I could hardly lift them; how on earth you carried them so far——"

"It was necessary."

"You might have stolen a camel from there to come back."

"If I had, they would most certainly have followed to recover it."

"What will they do now?"

"Allah knows! The minds of these people are as the flotsam driven by the waves. They knew Thies' plans certainly, but whether they will carry them out without a leader none can tell. It is an even chance whether they will not start, all in confusion, each man for himself, in a mad race homeward. They are on the borders of the Ababde country, and the Bisharein fear the Ababde."

"But they will 'rage furiously together' at the mischance of losing those hundreds of promised rifles. They may come to shoot us in vengeance."

"If it were my countrymen, they would certainly go and lie up among the crags and pick us off, because to do so would be amusing to them," said Dilir in all simplicity. "But it is not natural to these men; they would only have done so if compelled by the power of Thies. I said it is an even chance whether they string hastily across the desert home, and the other side of that chance is that they may hunt us out, and ride fast and furiously upon us to overwhelm us in droves, as the maddened herd of elephant charges."

"Yes, that is probable."

"I would suggest now that instead of making for the narrow winding pass, where it would not do to be entrapped, we should go straight for The Bab itself, timing it if possible to pass through in the darkness. The entrance to the pass, as you know, is much nearer to Gergaheit than The Bab is—indeed, about half the distance. There is less chance that the ghrazzu will ride so far afield as The Bab, and even if they did we should be in a better position, now that we are both sure they will not lie among the crags and shoot."

So it was arranged. Before rejoining the others, Dilir tied a torn strip of *damour* across the bridge of his nose, yashmak fashion, leaving only his deep-set eyes and burnt forehead visible. Durham explained to Iona that this was to keep off the sun and grit, and she made no remark, for though she well understood what the sacrifice of the Pathan must have been, she understood even better that to allude to it or to express gratitude would torment him still further.

The only concession he would accept, and not that until Durham positively ordered it, was to ride on the third camel instead of walking. Nafeesa for her part insisted on walking, and thus they started, with Edgar, who had seated himself without question, riding as usual. Their water-skins were well filled, their beasts fed and rested. They themselves were refreshed and braced up, and carried sufficient food. It was indeed a glorious change from the day before when they had arrived stalked by gaunt death!

Just as they were about to start Nafeesa ran back, and grabbing a handful of fine powdery sand from the root of a bush, sprinkled it through her

fingers in a spray on the red embers of the fire, muttering something.

"A spell?" Durham asked, smiling kindly at her.

"She says, 'May you be blessed in going and coming,'" translated Dilir in his low pleasant voice. "It is an Arab custom, for luck."

The district where they were now was much more broken and varied than that they had so far passed through. It was not long before the ground was thickly scattered with upstanding bluffs of rock, and great care had to be taken to prevent the camels stumbling or injuring their feet on those that were half-submerged. Nothing brought out the likeness of the desert to the sea more strongly than the way the sand was washed up into every crevice and cranny of these rocks just as if it were fluid. There were trickles and rivulets and pools of sand of the same shape and form as water to be seen everywhere.

By midday they had a much-needed rest, crouching for what shade they could get under a group of rather higher rocks, of the same kind as those they had been passing through for hours. There was very little wind to-day, and though the absence of the grit it always carried was a relief, yet there was not one among the party who would not willingly have endured that lesser evil for the sake of the coolness it brought. They were positively gaping as they lay by the hot rocks.

Durham had enlightened Maurice as to the position of affairs, as they walked side by side during the morning, but he had not said anything to the others of Thies' death or the possibility of attack; better for them still to believe that they were now beyond the immediate danger-zone,

though they knew they could not consider themselves even in probable safety until the great natural gateway called The Bab had been passed.

Now that the German's revolver had been added to their weapons, they possessed three revolvers and one automatic pistol, so they had agreed, before leaving the terrabil, to discard the rifle as being an unnecessary additional weight, especially as there was but little ammunition to fit it. They buried it deeply on the high slope of a terrabil and the ammunition elsewhere. Now, during the halt, they discussed the advisability of arming Pentland.

"He's a good shot, I believe," said Durham.

"He seems to be behaving more like a normal human being," said Maurice, who had not heard of his sleeping at his post. "I should say, yes, give the odd revolver to him. If these chaps do attack us, it may just turn the scale to have four spouters playing on them instead of three."

Dilir thought cheerfully it was highly probable that the first bullet fired would be into his back so soon as the party might be supposed to be in safety without him. He felt that Pentland meant to get even with him somehow, but aloud he merely remarked, "As an interested party I am bound to be neutral, so the ayes have it."

And he would not enlighten them further, though they pressed him, not understanding his allusion, as neither of them had seen the incident when Edgar measured his length on the ground for attempting to steal milk!

Dilir took the weapon, and handed it with some ammunition rather ceremoniously to Pentland, who seemed pleased, and began to take it to pieces and examine it with the air of an expert.

But he soon tired of that, and grew restless. The heat seemed to affect him almost more than the others. He moved up and down, and up and down, until at last Iona, who was lying with her face covered, said wearily, "Oh, Edgar, can't you keep still? It makes me hotter than ever just to hear you shuffling about"; then he subsided a little, and soon after they resumed their march. Durham's leg was almost well now, but he rode for a time during the afternoon, and Dilir, who insisted he was quite rested, walked in his turn.

The long chain of hills, which had been visible for some time on the northern horizon, seemed suddenly to have drawn nearer, and in the brilliant afternoon light, clear as crystal, they were presently even able to make out The Bab itself. They stopped shading their eyes to look at it, as a ship-wrecked sailor floating on a raft might look at the land.

"It is like the Tower Bridge," exclaimed Iona, and the comparison was not far-fetched, for though there was no cross-piece or bridge, yet the two sheer precipices upstanding on each side were in contour not unlike the sentinel towers of the famous bridge, and the ground sloping away at the back of each bore some resemblance to the slope of the mighty swings. It was very tiny but very clear, and it was difficult to believe it was as far away as the men said. They had arrived, however, rather sooner than they had calculated, and stopped to hold a conference as to whether they should go straight on or wait until darkness fell.

"As we are plainly visible to anyone looking for us here, anyway, I should say we had better go on," advised Durham.

"We may go plodding on right through it and never see the ghost of a raiding Arab," agreed Maurice, and as he did so he turned to look round and then uttered a slight exclamation. Far off on the eastern horizon was a rolling cloud of dust. There was not the slightest doubt about it—the even chance had come off against them!

"Iona," said Durham, standing beside her and looking up as she bent down toward him, astonished at his unexpected use of her christian name. "We can't keep you in ignorance any longer. These men are Bisharein. Thies is no longer with them, he is dead, but they are angry and are riding to intercept us."

"I understand," she said bravely, looking at that dim dust-cloud so full of menace.

There was no need to explain to Nafeesa, she had known all about it the instant her eyes had lighted on that distant cloud; it could be caused by nothing but camel men on a foray. She had never clearly understood about Thies or the part he played, but she was well aware that the Koatil, with whom her tribe, the Mallak, were on friendly visiting terms, were set on capturing this party to whom she now belonged. Though Dilir had told her very little, yet her desert instinct had warned her of trouble, and all day she had been watching the horizon.

"It has come," she said simply, looking down at Dilir,

"Even so," he responded, and for the moment said nothing more, but busied himself with jettisoning all the camel-fodder and everything else the camel carried except the indispensable water-skins.

Maurice, however, was fuming. Of all the party

he was the worst off, saddled with an intolerable *rafik* like Pentland. It had been a bitter pill for his pride to swallow when he knew he must submit to this arrangement, necessary because he was not half the man the other two were, and must therefore take his chance with the undesired Pentland whilst they looked after the women. Now the matter was assuming a most ominous aspect, for he was not prepared to risk one chance of life for the valueless hulk who shared his camel. That the chances were not many, he knew well. As he followed Dilir's example in lightening his camel, he expected some question from Pentland, but, to his surprise, none came.

The little party were about half as far from The Bab as the foray party was from them, but as they rode forward their pursuers would naturally cut across diagonally to intercept them, thus increasing the odds in their favour. The camels they were riding were also probably in good trotting condition, beasts such as are usually kept for this sort of work—at least, a proportion of them would be. If the whole ghrazzu numbered fifty, as many as thirty or forty might have to be reckoned with in the end, the others falling behind as the speed increased. Now, though the naga and the captured camel ridden by Maurice were quite capable of a good loping trot even after a hardish day's work, the third camel could only be worked up to trot at all under extreme pressure, and would not last long at it. It would be necessary to spare it in every possible way for the supreme effort. For if they could reach the rocks in safety, it was likely that with a bit of luck four armed Europeans would be able to disperse and drive off forty Arabs, for they would have cover and

could choose their position, but if they were overtaken in the open there would be small chance for any of them. If it came to that, the first shots from the revolvers must be for the women, neither of whom would be permitted to fall alive into the hands of these maniacs, and that done the men, to whom life could have no more value, would only have to try how many of the foes they could take along with them into the Great Beyond. It needed no conversation between the leaders to make this clear, they both thought alike on the subject, and words were unnecessary. But in one point their cases were not quite parallel; bitterly as it jarred on Dilir to know it, there was a possibility that Nafeesa might prefer to return to the people she had lived among, rather than be shot. He was quite determined that she should not do so, whatever her wishes he would give her no choice in the matter, but the mere fact that she might have a preference for returning to her desert life rather than for being shot by his hand so maddened him that his mind craved for certainty. In his eagerness he tore aside the makeshift yashmak, and disclosed to her, for the first time, his scarred face, as, reaching upward with both hands on her skirt, he demanded fiercely, "If we are caught in the open, it will mean death for us men, but you women they would not injure, rather will they carry you away. Tell me now, Littlest Hawk of my Heart, if that moment comes, which then would be the less bitter to thee, death by my hand so that we enter the Halls of the Great Ones together, or to return again to life with such as these?"

Nafeesa had gazed at the hideous apparition so ruthlessly presented to her, without any of the

qualms which had assailed her brother, now she bent down and touched the raw-red cheek with one hand almost caressingly, and said instantly, "Nafeesa has chosen; when that moment comes have no doubts, but shoot with a good heart."

For once Dilir was swept by a storm of emotion he could not control; he turned from her and, burying his face on the tufted neck of the camel, remained so for a second or two, then raising it again with a proud shake was ready to meet with Fate.

All this had taken but a minute or two, and now, as they moved forward, the men at first ran beside the camels to save them so far as they could, but it could not long be kept up. The ground was fairly firm, but to run continuously in that atmosphere, even for men in good condition, was well-nigh impossible. Durham was forced to give up first, for the action of running disclosed the weakness of his not absolutely healed leg, and his stumbles became so frequent that he felt he was hindering rather than helping the forward movement. As soon as this became apparent, he hissed to the camel to kneel down, and losing not an unnecessary second seated himself and soon caught up the others again. Maurice stood it a little longer, then he too mounted, and though Dilir went on a considerable time to save his weaker beast, yet in the end he too had to take to the saddle. He did it reluctantly, for well he knew a double rider is almost a full burden for a running camel.

The naga got over the ground gallantly, but the curious fashion still prevalent in camel-land, though disdained by more civilised beasts of

burden, of flinging the two off-legs and then the two near ones along together, makes the motion most trying to those unused to it directly the pace gets beyond a walk or trained amble. The action of Maurice's mount was rougher far even than that of the naga, and the desperate jerks of the poor third beast in response to Dilir's adjurations would have choked any but such riders as those it carried. As it was, though he ignored the pain of his stretched and torn face, and urged it with every suitable Arabic word he could command, he had the greatest difficulty in making it get on at all. When he ceased for sheer want of breath, Nafeesa immediately took up the tale and yelled at it shrilly.

The next hour was a long progress of strained agony to Iona, who felt as if her heart were trying to leap out through her throat at every stride; she determined to die rather than complain, but she fully expected to die any minute when her heart at last broke its internal mooring-strings and flew out of her mouth. She glanced from time to time at the others, and was astonished to see they did not appear to be in nearly such agony as herself. Her husband seemed to suffer little inconvenience, and though Maurice was panting hard, and now and again pressed his hand to his side, his face was not screwed up with pain.

There was no doubt that the maddened horde was gaining, and the only question, and one most difficult to answer in such circumstances, was whether that gain would be sufficient to wipe out the initial advantage of the fugitives before they could reach the shelter of the rocks.

One moment the range of hills looked clear and sharp, and the rolling cloud of dust not much

nearer than it had been, and the next the conditions were reversed, the hills seemed very far and the rumbling mass of riders so near that even individual riders and camels could be discerned.

Presently, right away ahead, about half-a-mile the east side of The Bab, an upstanding streak of white appeared on a striking pillar of rock the shape of a giant tombstone or rectangular slab. Dilir pointed toward it, and speaking with the utmost clearness he could manage, cried to the others: "Make for that white rock, turn in behind it; there is a narrow passage we can hold."

Maurice, who was ahead, held up a hand to show he understood, while Durham, recognising instantly that Dilir knew he was falling behind, ceased his incitements to the naga, and let her fall into the loping amble which seemed to suit her best. The relief Iona gained by the change of movement was so intense, that she gave a great sob. Long had she felt that if her life alone depended on the issue she would have stopped and faced the peril, instead of enduring any longer the throb of that heart-cutting agony. But the matter did not strike Dilir in that light at all. "This is foolishness," he cried out angrily. "Get on and do not linger. We can take our chance."

Durham paid no heed, and Iona's breast thrilled with pride; not even to save her and himself would he leave his friends behind. For some moments Dilir had been goading his poor mount by pricking it with the point of his knife like a spur; a sharper thrust brought him level with the naga and kept him there a few moments, but he knew this was a

desperate measure, and feared every instant to feel the camel go down under him.

Pentland and Maurice were now some distance ahead, and all of a sudden the former gave a kind of queer leap as he sat, and poured out a shrill volley of camel-language of such force and profundity that the camel he was riding made a tremendous effort in response, and increased the distance between them and the others by yards. As Pentland had never before used any camel-words, or attempted to urge or control his steed, the effect on Maurice was scarifying. Then he realised dimly that Edgar's retentive brain must have caught and stored the sounds he had heard from time to time, and that sudden panic had made them available. Instead of proving an incubus he had even done something to enable them to reach the haven!

But the others were in worse and worse plight; even Dilir's cruel thrusts could not now keep the jaded camel up with the naga's feeblest amble, and the knowledge that he was holding back those others whose safety was so dear to him almost split his loyal heart in two. "For the love of Allah," he burst out at last imploringly, "Bimbashi, save the life of the lady!" Iona shook her head forcibly, and the glow that she had felt a moment ago for Durham now ran through him at this proof of her high courage.

Then there was suddenly borne to their ears the shrill cry of blood-lust, the whooping terror of the hunting pack on the trail, the raw scream of the wild animal in man let loose, and involuntarily they all braced themselves anew. The wolves were close upon them, and at least half-a-mile of broken ground with sharp and jagged

rocks lay between them and even a chance of safety.

Then something swiftly hurtled past them in the air and stuck in the ground beyond; it was one of the throwing-daggers of the foremost rider whose admirable beast had carried him lengths in front of the others.

Durham looked round, and seeing how the matter was, slowed down his camel by a word and wheeled it half round, then taking what aim he could, shot at the man who had thrown the dagger and saw him come headlong down on the neck of his beast. Then turning back he quickly made up the lost ground over which Dilir's beast had ploughed broken-windedly. It was a thrilling moment, and all the spirit in Iona leaped to meet it; she forgot her pain, her anxiety, her awful cowering fear, and sitting erect in front of the man she admired with her whole heart, faced that terrifying band with their brandished arms, their uncouth mounts, their flying rags of garments and their évil faces. For the first time she realised the intense virulence of a horde of fanatics. They had lost all touch with reality, some were even foaming at the mouth; they had forgotten time and place, and the power of the white rulers of their land; they were as impervious to argument or reason as a wounded tigress when it leaps to the charge. Nothing could have stopped them but a few rounds from a machine-gun, and even that would only have decimated them and left the rest riding on to red death in a whirl of fanaticism.

The end was very near now. In another few yards down came Dilir's camel, and he and Nafeesa, who had both been expecting the catastrophe,

nimbly lighted on their feet. In obedience to his command, she ran on with her back to the foe and her face to the white veined rock, while he, standing where he was, fired into the advancing mass. He stood thus until the others on their camel had passed him and even still until they reached the rock.

There was not one second for expostulation or argument. Dilir was exultant; in the glorious struggle for the post of greatest danger, he had won, for even if Durham had wished he could not have made the camel kneel and dismounted before the savages were around them. So he rode on round the corner of the flat slab of rock, which stood like an *avant-porte* across the entrance to the pass, and found behind it a short narrow ascent at which he had to urge the naga. The camel is essentially a beast of the level, but it can get up slopes better than it can go down. This one made a gallant struggle, and landed at the top where the narrow track ran straight on. Nafeesa was already here, but there was no sign of the other two.

Durham's last glimpse as he turned the right-angled corner into shelter had been that proud figure with head erect and a bloody mask for a face standing to hold back half-a-hundred savages!

But the unexpected happened! Death did not overwhelm Dilir instantly. For when the riders came within the zone strewn with jagged rocks their natural instinct as camel-men allayed for a moment their madness, and they slowed down, watching the feet of their precious beasts.

To face any sort of civilised man, standing armed awaiting them, requires just the species of courage these tribes do not possess. If they

had carried on at a flood-tide, yelling in company, they would have swept over Dilir, hacking and slashing him into a thousand fragments. But the check was fatal to their zeal, and some began to dismount. Those who had rifles knelt to take aim. Two bullets spattered on the rocks, but Dilir did not stay for any more of that, he had done what he set out to do, and with an incredibly swift movement, resembling that of a little animal more than anything feasible to a human being, he had doubled the slab of rock and was after his comrades.

A howl of savage fury arose from behind the barrier, but for the moment none followed him, all having a wholesome fear of the weapon in the man's hand. So Dilir ran on, stumbling up the slope, and overtaking the camel in the narrow track just as Durham made it stop. Nafeesa was there too, and the instant they saw the Pathan safe they all hastened on together along the narrow way The bare rocks, which had absorbed the heat the whole day, now gave it forth with intensity, and no wind penetrated into this chasm, so the place was like an oven. As they passed along, turning and twisting with the windings of the track, both men listened intently.

"They will not bring their camels in here," said Dilir hastily. "There is just a chance that they may be unwilling to leave them in this strange country, and they may break back across the desert."

"But they may tie up the knees of the camels, and leaving them below, flow up over these rocks on each side to shoot down at us," said Durham. "We must not be caught so low. We must let the camel go and climb the heights."

Even as he spoke he knew that for the second time that day the even chance had been decided against them. There was heard the sharp crackling of bullets on the rocks from whence they had come, and a few of the more adventurous spirits began to appear with waving spears on the high side of the crags behind.

Iona felt herself lifted straight off the camel on to the raised slope; Dilir gave the animal a resounding thwack and sent it scudding on along the winding defile.

On one side of the little pass, the side on which lay The Bab, was a long slope rising at a fairly steep angle, and though open at first it was, higher up, thickly strewn with large boulders. On the opposite side the cliff rose too steeply to be considered as a feasible outlet. Durham pointed to the zone of boulders on The Bab side as giving a chance of cover, and seizing Iona's arm began to hurry her over the bare ground intervening, hoping to reach shelter before the advance-guard of the howling mob got within dangerous limits. Dilir looked around to do the same for Nafeesa, but for once Nafeesa had lost her head. She had been on in front of the others, and had stood up a little on one side to let the camel gallop past as Dilir thwacked it, and then she had suddenly caught sight of several of the tribesmen up against the skyline in the high angles of the crags at the back, and with a paroxysm of fear she had dashed blindly forward from where she stood. Abandoning his idea of joining forces with Durham, Dilir leaped after her, but she was as quick of foot as he, and before he caught her up it was too late to bring her back. She had jumped behind a large crag overhanging the path, and just as Dilir

sprang to her side a bullet zipped past, missing him very narrowly.

Meantime Durham and Iona were in full view, struggling up the slippery rock in a nightmare effort which seemed to get them no further. Before they were half-way to their goal they had been noticed, and a shower of spears was sent after them. Some fell short, but others quivered around their feet. It was almost more terrifying to a woman to see the bright blades than to hear the invisible bullets, but Iona kept on repeating to herself, "I must be brave, I must be brave," in a sort of hopeless monotone, as Durham forced her upward with his strong hand on her arm, holding her when she stumbled, hauling her when she slipped back, and keeping himself as far as possible between her and the attackers. Seeing that he did not retaliate, some of the bolder spirits came down from their perches, and standing actually on the slope poised the dangerous short throwing-daggers with heavy knobbed heads. At this Durham wheeled and discharged a sharp right and left; he saw one man drop his weapon and clutch at his arm, and the rest ran back a pace or two.

At that moment, Dilir, stepping deliberately out of his cover, drew the attention of the assailants on himself by firing at them in flank. One of the rifle-carrying men had just arrived on the scene, and swung round his aim at Dilir, who sprang back in time to avoid getting a bullet through his head.

The minute's diversion thus granted had enabled the other two to gain the zone of the boulders, and as they disappeared amongst them, Dilir placed his sun-helmet on a pinnacle of the rock

behind which he and Nafeesa were sheltering, and with a little push, set it swinging to and fro.

"That will occupy them," he exclaimed as he hurried her under cover down into the trench of the path, and followed her, filling the magazine of his pistol as he went.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT BAY

" A hundred, a thousand to one; even so;
Not a hope in the world remained:
The swarming howling wretches below
Gained and gained and gained."

DURHAM and Mrs. Pentland had been forced gradually back up the huge slope of the rock from one point of vantage to another. Their assailants had a very lively fear of the weapon in the Englishman's hand, and they did not come after them in the open, but they crawled round in an endeavour to outflank the quarry, and as they succeeded, so time after time the two who were pursued executed a strategic retreat. Without turning his head or appearing to look round much, Durham always knew exactly where they were, and the sharp crack of his revolver, right or left, sent the too daring advance-guard staggering back out of sight, and gave just that moment's grace which earned safety for the next few seconds. But this continual giving of ground could only end in one way. The long slope curved upward to the top of the cliff which formed the eastern side of The Bab, and as Durham and Iona backed yard by yard they were rising all the way, until the limit of their retreat was in sight; they were almost at the brink of the precipice, and to

break away was impossible, because of those crawling wily bundles of drab-coloured clothes which were insinuating themselves in between the stones and rocks, and edging up on both sides.

The tribesmen were out for blood, mere frenzied fanatics. Dilir could not help, he was probably hard put to it to hold his own and look after Nafeesa; he could create no diversion. This was the end. The barren up-smiting rock was the altar on which their lives would be sacrificed with every circumstance of horrid barbarity. Above them, like a copper dome, glowed the pitiless sky, lurid in the sunset light, and before them from their height they could see the sweep of the illimitable desert, against which the scarred and broken pinnacles of the tawny range stood out as if etched, while their own long shadows ran out to meet it from their feet, as they stood with their backs to the setting sun. It was a marvellous impressionist picture, but sinister and menacing.

The slope was slightly convex toward the top, and Durham's fine shooting had persuaded his foes that it was well to keep out of sight, so for the moment no turbaned head or shaggy poll appeared, no flutter of a garment broke the barrenness of the bare rock. They two might have been alone awaiting the coming of the Day of Judgment.

Durham was keenly searching for the means of defence. From where they stood, at the side of a mass of broken débris, up to the very edge of the precipice, there was a fairly clear space, scattered by stones, indeed, though none large enough to afford cover to more than a hare, but on the

rim of the precipice itself was a very large detached piece of rock standing at an angle; at once he took in the possibilities of this and hurried Iona toward it. At one end the fragment was so near the edge that none of the Arabs could get round it to throw their weapons or shoot, and thus it afforded excellent cover. It sprang rapidly outward, however, leaving a good space of two or three yards behind, in which it was possible to move in safety without too great danger of stepping backwards and falling over into the abyss. The boulder itself was taller than a tall man by a foot or so, and completely screened anyone behind it. It was the best place that they had yet found, but it was the last!

Durham put Iona into the corner behind him, and warned her not to look round or step back, and then saw to the loading of his revolver. She stood beside him, panting from her exertions and the terrific current of excitement, but gradually her heart quieted down; he was so strong, so staunch, like a goodly oak-tree, that of a sudden she felt a vibration not of fear but—was it joy? Whatever happened they were together. At the very worst they would pass together, he and she, into the Unknown. If identity survived the grave, they would be together then for ever. Life in comparison was a barren and a feeble thing, for life meant separation, and always that slow pain in the heart, the life-ache, for which death was the radiant cure. So a glad smile broke over her face as she looked up to her companion, and the attraction of her gaze drew his. He had finished re-loading, and for an instant he looked down into her eyes, withdrawing all the curtain of his reserve and penetrating to her very soul.

"Is it the end?" she asked.

He gave a low laugh. "We'll get out yet—I've been in tighter places——"

"Will you be very sure not to leave me behind alone?"

"If I go I'll take you with me," he promised; then to her astonishment he did a wonderful thing, for bending down his strong face, transfigured with a shining eagerness, he kissed her full on the mouth; immediately after he straightened himself abruptly. "They are coming!" he said. A low ominous growl, punctuated by hoarse shouts, was wafted around them. Some of the more daring of the savages had raised their heads above the stones below and discovered that their prey was hidden from them. But for the moment none dared be the first to bait the lion at bay.

Durham looked behind him, then all at once went down flat on the ground and peered over the edge of the precipice, while Iona watched him with curiosity.

"Can you do what I tell you?" he asked as he rose.

She nodded with set lips.

"It may mean death," he explained.

"I am not afraid."

He slipped out of his coat, and putting his hand through her leather belt gave a tug to see if it were strong. It held. He passed one of the sleeves of his coat through, and knotted it firmly, speaking at the same time.

"I'm going to let you down," he said.

Iona looked mutely at the small coat and the two hundred feet drop below, and wildly imagined he was going to let her go to be dashed to death!

"Please shoot me instead," she said in a very small voice.

He actually smiled, and what she saw in his face reassured her. He began to point and explain. "Not very many feet down there," he said, "is a square-cut hole in the face of the cliff—a cave—I had forgotten until this moment, but I've seen it before from below, and we're right above it. With this you can reach it, or nearly."

"And you?" she asked, gripping his shirt-sleeve.

"I will come. Over you go."

The cliff was not quite perpendicular here, but bulged out, yet as she felt herself going her terror was that she should faint, for all the blood left her head as she crawled backwards into space.

"Look at me!" Durham commanded sharply, and she turned her glance meekly upward and saw his big shining eyes pouring strength into her from out of a white cloud.

He was down on the ground now, with the extreme end of the other sleeve hitched round one hand, and he paid it out as she went lower. But the more awful moment was yet to come! So long as she was partially supported by the cliff, it was as nothing to the moment when she felt her toes and then her knees hang in space and grope vainly for a hold. Still he let her down, and still she clung to the gaze of those steady bright eyes as if it were a physical grasp. Now only her hands gripping the coat-sleeve, and her head, were still against the cliff-face, and slowly she swung clear altogether. She did look down then, and saw she was hanging in front of a large rectangular hole taller than herself, and some feet below was the floor, with a tiny projecting ledge.

Durham was speaking quite slowly and calmly without any suggestion of hurry. "You must tell me when you are ready to jump down," he said very distinctly. "I can reach no farther. But I won't let go until you give the word. Take your time."

"Take your time!" It was that that did it! All at once the full sense of the situation rushed over Iona with the vivid clearness of the spirit world. She knew all about everything. She knew that any moment one of the more adventurous savages, having climbed up the great boulder behind him, might drive his spear into Durham's back as he lay helpless on the ground, she knew that every precious second involved a terrible chance of his losing his life, and yet he could say to her reassuringly, "Take your time." Courage of the firmest sort flowed into her. She felt no fear at all. For the moment she was all spirit; she would not have been at all bewildered if she had been able to fly easily and lightly, floating on outstretched wings down into the abyss. All this flashed in a second through her mind, and almost as the words left his mouth she responded in a clear voice, "Let go," and dropped with a light jump down on to the floor of the cavern. It was not really a difficult feat. If she had been standing on the top of a chest of drawers at home and been told to jump off on to the carpet she could have done it. Here she had no take-off, but after leaving the convex surface of the cliff she had swung slightly inwards, so physically the action was quite easy, it was only rendered hard by paralysis of the nerves. Almost instantly after she landed she heard Durham's revolver go off to the full extent of the magazine.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight," and each time she gasped, knowing that the hand that held it was not stilled. There were answering shots, one or two, but the Arabs were not very fond of firearms, trusting much more to their accustomed weapons, and those who had rifles were few among them.

There followed an ominous silence, and agony gripped Iona's heart. What if they had shot him? If he never came? What was happening above? The terror of it brought down upon her an appalling pillar of blackness that seemed to fall right out of the sky and bury her in its desolation. Then dimly through the surging curtain she heard a scraping, blessed sound! A scratching, a falling of small loosened bits of rock, then the veil of darkness parted as a boot appeared, waving wildly; she stood holding up her hands as if to grasp it, and even as she did so, Durham landed beside her.

"Thank God," she said with all her heart.

"Amen," he responded gravely.

She had never seen him so moved; his face had lost every atom of its hearty colour and was grey and haggard; beads of perspiration broke out and rolled down, and for the moment he could not utter another syllable. She was afraid he was hurt, wounded, perhaps mortally, and when she saw him sink down on a ledge inside the cave, her fears were doubled. She dropped on one knee beside him. "You're hurt?" she cried. "I can't bear it! Don't die, you promised to take me too, I can't live without you now."

He put a hand on each of her shoulders, and looked at her with all his soul in his face, but yet quite unable to speak; his iron self-control had

been pierced, the barrier was down! A surge of wild joy flooded over her. So long had she pictured him as he had always been and she imagined always would be, kind, friendly, considerate, but utterly unapproachable, secure behind a shield that no emotion could penetrate, and now his hands were actually trembling, he was trying to speak and could not!

But not for long, he soon had himself in hand again. "No, no, I'm not hurt," he said in a queer broken voice. "It just came over me——" He broke off and tried again. "It's natural to take chances when one is in a tight place, but I didn't quite realise what might have happened until I had sent you over——" He stopped again. She gripped his wrist. "You mean you might have been shot, and I left here alone unable to get back?"

He nodded, still incapable of trusting his voice.

"Oh, my dear," she said, and buried her face for a moment in his shirt-sleeve. Was this Durham? The proud impenetrable man, who was "heartless," "insensitive"? It was too wonderful to be true. She knew what had unnerved him only too well. First, as she had dropped on to the floor of the cave in that moment of exaltation, she had hovered above him in the spirit, freed from the body, and known the agony it was to him to let the coat go at her cry, not knowing whether the next moment he might not have seen her miss her footing and fall before his eyes to hideous death! And then, as he said, standing there alone to face his foes, he had realised that he was not bullet-proof, and that if one of those random shots had pierced his brain she would be immured!

It certainly was enough to break the most iron nerve!

All of a sudden burst forth a terrific hubbub from so close overhead that involuntarily Iona started and turned to the entrance, still clinging to her companion. "Will they come in here?" she cried.

He had regained all his self-possession. "No," he said confidently.

"They may climb down."

"Should be sorry for them if they did."

They listened intently. Up above it seemed as if a world of demons had been let loose; big stones were brought to the edge of the cliff and hurled down, rifles went off at random. Even a spear or two hurtled out into space, as the savages danced with impotent rage at having missed their prey.

"Do they know of this place?"

"Certainly." Very gently he raised her, and picking up his coat put it on. Together they stood looking down at the river of sand flowing through the monstrous gateway, and then across at the further cliff, up-smiting defiance into the sky, now a blurred and dusky red.

"But we can't get out," said Iona after a pause.

"No more we can."

"Have we anything to eat?"

"Hungry?" he asked, smiling.

"No, oh no."

There was a long silence, and the noise above died down a little, and then grew fainter, breaking off into an occasional yell further and further away. "They're off," said Durham in satisfaction. "I knew they wouldn't face the dark in these black hills, they are people of the plain; when they get on the run they'll go in panic, scrambling back to their camels and away. Besides, they're afraid of the spooks."

"Spooks? Here?"

"It's a sepulchre, you know, the tomb of a holy man, a grand place too!"

Iona wheeled round rather hastily, looking inwards, and gave a strangled cry. The little light that was left struck right into the cave and showed a man sitting up against the inner wall. Together they approached that figure, which had lain long in its awful solitude now so rudely invaded, and they saw that the body was that of a tall man with smooth yellowish flesh, naked to the waist, with his legs rolled in wrappings of damour of the same colour as his body. So natural was the attitude, as he sat leaning back, with his hands lying along on the ground on each side of him, that it was difficult to believe he was not still alive.

Durham examined him. "Been dead for years," he said—"flesh keeps for ever in these dry latitudes, and the jackals can't get him here."

The light went out suddenly, and a slight cold wind began to creep around the cave.

"I am not a bit hungry, but I am so thirsty," Iona burst out.

Durham cleaned a pebble as well as he was able, and courteously presented it to her. "Suck that," he advised. "It helps."

His manner was back at the usual quiet, natural, but remote point, which set miles of space between them. She understood quite well that it was the innate chivalry of the man which taught him thus to meet their most peculiar situation; he wanted her to understand that not a breath of sentiment was to be feared from him. She loved him for it, but woman-like hungered for the expression of the love she now knew was hers. It was so hard to

get a glimpse of that surpassing tenderness, to know that all she had hoped and believed was true, that behind that unmoved exterior his heart beat deep and strong, and that he too, like other men, had currents of deep emotion, just to get a glimpse of it all, and then to see the ice close over it again! She felt it the more because she was terribly exhausted, worn out by all the strain she had experienced; she wanted to creep into his arms, lay her head on that broad shoulder, where once in a moment of unnervedness already she had laid it, and have a good cry, but she must play up to him. If he could play the game, it was still more incumbent on her to do so, for of the two she was the one who was bound in honour to someone else, whilst he, at all events, owed no loyalty elsewhere. This brought her mind back to her husband, and with a swift pang of compunction she realised she had not given him one thought during all these awful hours. She began to talk of him rather feverishly, discussing the chances of all the rest of the party.

"If Dilir's not had the bad luck to be dropped by a bullet, he'll have got off somehow," said Durham. "I can't conceive what can have happened to the other two. The camel must have got out of control and carried them right ahead. They will never find their way out the other side, Dilir says it is impossible if you do not know the track, but I expect they will come back in the daylight."

Then the trend of his thought changed. "If you don't mind, now that it's dark, we'll give this grisly third a bed elsewhere."

He dragged the venerable "holy man" by the legs to the mouth of the cave and let him go.

He fell far below without a sound that they could hear. "Possibly there are jackals around, who'll have him for supper," said Durham. "Not cold storage—dry storage!"

"Won't it enrage the Arabs if they see him?" Iona asked.

"No, he doesn't belong to these fellows at all. Long before their time, ages old. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it. To respect the susceptibilities of the governed is one of the first axioms dinned into us of the Service."

He produced a tinder-box with a short flare of twisted grass and cotton in it, and began poking about at the back of the cave. "Removing the gentleman has opened up possibilities," he said. "I hoped it might. There is a hole here that was completely covered by his sitting body."

Iona came over and looked at it.

"I'm going to explore it," he announced. "If you don't mind being left alone a few moments?" Never once had he looked at her since he had recovered his balance, and well did she know why!

He crawled in, taking the light with him, and completely filling the narrow opening with his broad shoulders. She waited in the darkness for what seemed a long time, watching the rectangular strip of sky cut out by the aperture of the cavern—a strip of royal blue spangled with giant stars. She was living in a dream, so agonising yet so sweet that she willed never to wake. How could she ever again face the stuffiness of a life filled by tedious details, decorated by an eternal patience and forbearance, and smothered with boredom?

"It goes quite a long way back," said Durham,

returning. "It broadens out, then narrows again, and ends in a hole blocked by a huge stone. When I looked up at this place as I passed once before, I wondered however the fellows managed it and many another like it, but of course I might have guessed—they dug it out in a shaft from the back, laboriously passing up the stuff excavated, as the workers did in some of the cliff-temples of Egypt."

"Yes," she said in an uninterested way.

Why did he not sit down close beside her and, holding her in his arms, tell her all that was in his heart and discuss the future openly with her, so that she might know, might know?

"The stone at the end is not beyond my strength, I think. I did not attempt to move it to-night—safer not. But there is every prospect of our getting out on to that slope again to-morrow."

"Yes," she said again in the same tone.

But her heart cried, "Do you want to get out? To face it all again? You going one way and I another? You here in the Sudan with your work, your ambitions, your strong free life, and I in my little cage in England sick of soul—oh, deathly sick! Rather, take me in your arms, press your brow to mine, and end it all with one of those remaining bullets through our two heads!"

She pulled herself together with a jerk. She must be getting light-headed from exhaustion! Durham possibly judged she was almost done from her silence and listlessness.

"You must be worn out," he said, but with none of the tenderness in his tone for which her soul thirsted. "I only came back to settle you as comfortably as possible in the circumstances. I shall have to spend my night up there, close up against the other end with my revolver handy."

Then she roused herself. "Won't you be able to sleep at all?"

"Like a teetotaler," he assured her, and she knew that the idea of keeping watch was a polite fiction so as to leave her to herself in the cave.

"But you'll be very uncomfortable?"

"Not a bit of it. Warmer than you, I'm afraid. This is a draughty place. Just here in this corner is the best. Do you mind taking care of my coat for me? I should be uncomfortably hot in it in there."

Then she laughed. "You liar!" she said uncompromisingly.

He laughed too, but his intensely matter-of-fact manner did not yield a degree. "The desert life cuts off all frills from speech," he remarked. "Very well, if you won't have it one way you shall another. I order you to keep that coat."

"By what authority?" she demanded mutinously.

"My authority as Leader."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Wouldn't try. Might get shot." He threw the coat over her knees, and with extraordinary promptitude departed up his tunnel.

"He might at all events have tucked it in and made me comfy," she mourned to herself, and a few slow tears trickled down her cheeks.

But Durham bit so hard on the stem of the empty pipe he held between his teeth, that he went right through it, and to his own surprise found himself swearing so volubly, though very low, for a few minutes, that he was startled. Swearing had never been a safety-valve of his!

CHAPTER XIX

THE ESCAPE BY THE BAB

THE narrow path up which the English party had come went on up and down over crests and hollows, winding in and out between the raw-edged rocks, and for some time was easy to follow, but it finally seemed to come to an abrupt end. For at this point a mass of rock intervened, up which no camel ever foaled could have found its way. This great lump, rising high into the sky, was split asunder as if a Titanic wedge had some time been driven in. Towering above the fissure on the one side was the cliff-like precipice with a tiny foot track or ledge along the face of it, such as only a born mountaineer could hope to tackle safely. On the other side of the gulf a great rounded hummock curved down to the depths, with its surface here and there shiny and black like coal, and in other places covered with stones, chunks of rock, and boulders of every size.

Here it seemed certainly as if the pass must end, for the only outlet was a very sharp descent, turning to the right at right-angles to the track, and falling by stages to a broad sandy valley, which seemed to point back again in the direction from whence the path had come.

When the early light of morning paled the sky the day following that of the attack, it struck

on the precipitous face of the sundered cliff, bringing into relief the innumerable angles and indentations outlined by their shadows. It revealed the figure of a man, in khaki-coloured European clothes, standing on the tiny ledge with his face pressed against the scarred skin of the forbidding rock. For long intervals together the figure stood motionless, hanging on, it seemed, merely by adhesion above the great crevasse, and then it took a step or two, slowly and mechanically, to the right, working back apparently by this terrible route to the small and safe camel-track. The grasping hands with outstretched fingers conveyed a pitiful sense of appeal, as if they were trying to placate that frowning wall so menacing in its hostility. Yet the man held his own, he did not yield to the tendency of the rock to thrust him away; for slow minutes he stood gathering nerve, and for slow seconds he progressed, moving foot by foot toward his goal without once looking round or below.

On the black shining slope opposite there crouched another figure, similarly dressed, watching him with a curious and minute attention something like that the cat bestows on the unconscious bird hopping within reach of its spring. Though it was obvious that the man pressed flat against the wall could not have spared a glance in that direction without losing his balance, yet the man watching him seemed to be hiding, for he doubled and crawled from boulder to boulder, bending with a peculiar hideous slyness associated with the movements of those mentally unsound. He ran bending, and crouched again, ever nearer and nearer to the other, gibbering to himself as he ran. It was Edgar Pentland. A kind of

slaver had formed in the corners of his mouth and dripped out. His face was deep purple and his small eyes fierily bloodshot. He munched and talked incessantly.

"Beastly German! Kill him! Kill, kill, and spare not to the uttermost farthing, two doves and an anna, no jolly fear. Whence comest thou? Out of Eden with garments dyed purple in Basra. Basra? Now what is that? Blood?"

He had drawn on and on down the slope, unheeding the yawning gulch below, and he moved with a security and ease of movement he had never showed in his sane moments. He had got now within revolver range of the spread-eagled figure opposite across the crevasse, and as he was almost on the same level, the shot was not a difficult one, especially as the morning light fell upon that side. Suddenly Pentland stood up, gave a furtive look all round, saw nothing but the swarthy wilderness of barren piercing peaks, and took deliberate aim at the slim figure in the khaki suit that showed up against the rough rock. The shot rang out with a wild echo, and the bullet struck the face of the cliff about two paces to right of the man's arm. The figure jerked convulsively and threw up both arms overhead in a mute appeal for quarter from the unknown destroyer.

Pentland munched more rapidly and altered his position.

"Direction bad, elevation good, two paces more to the left, steady, present, fire!"

Out rang the revolver once more, and this time the shot went six inches above the sun-helmet which the victim wore. He remained as if squashed flat against the surface of the rock, inanimate

except that the long thin fingers of the outstretched hands made desperate crawling movements.

But the shots had been heard; from the slope behind and above Pentland Dilir's scarred face appeared, quickly followed by Nafeesa's untidy head.

It needed but a second for Dilir to grasp the situation.

"Allah!" he cried, "Pentland's gone mad and is potting Temple!"

He was too far off to stop the second shot, though he arrived before it left the revolver, so he made a hollow of his hands and yelled, "Stop that! It's Temple, can't you see?"

Edgar Pentland turned, with a look of triumphant cunning, and gave an ecstatic little hop-skip, flourishing his weapon.

"The German!" he shouted back, forgetting all his concealment. "Can't get off, got him on toast," and he fired wildly once more against the rock-face, luckily wide of the wretched target. As the reverberations rolled away down the gorge, echoing a thousand times as the two first had done, Dilir hurled himself down the slippery slope like a stone from a sling.

Maurice had heard his voice and moaned faintly, beating the wall with his hands, but he dare not stir or look, for his nerve had gone.

The impetus of Dilir's rush carried him right on top of Edgar Pentland, who had his back to him, preparing for still more deliberate aim, but Pentland fell to one side and Dilir flew on head-first for several yards, only saving himself from a glissade into the crevasse by thrusting his arm in between two great stones, so that for the moment he found it difficult to extricate. By the time he

was on his feet again Pentland was dancing wildly about, his face delirious with joy. "Thies, Thies," he shouted—"beastly German devil."

"It's not Thies, you madman! It's Temple, Temple," Dilir yelled as he came up the slope to the charge, full in the face of the armed lunatic. His cry attracted Pentland's attention to himself. The grin of madness left his face and was replaced by something diabolically horrible.

"Ah, you!" he said with cold deliberation. "Yes, I know you, I meant to kill you, better now, why not?"

He swung his aim upon the Pathan coming up from below. But he had reckoned without Nafeesa, who was close behind, and seized his arm in her two hands, sending the bullet sweeping skywards. In foaming fury Pentland swung round at her, there was a shattering explosion, one loud cry, and then as she lay in a huddle on the ground he staggered backwards and suddenly fell with a terrific crash. He went full length on the back of his head with tremendous force, at a spot where the treacherous slope was black and shining and free from stones, and the impetus of the fall, yet unspent, made him glissade onward, head-first, into the yawning gulf until he disappeared abruptly over the edge without a sound or cry.

Nafeesa, who had been knocked down by the explosion, but not injured, had clutched Dilir's arm as he reached her, and together they stood in rigid stillness watching the hideous scene.

"Stone dead! Shot himself first!" Dilir ejaculated, and then threw a lightning glance across the gulch to the piteous figure clinging to the cruel wall of rock, only able to guess at all that was happening behind its back!

"Temple, it's all right," he cried, sending his strong reassuring voice across the void. "You're perfectly safe. I'm coming. Hold on."

Down the slippery hillside he went slantwise, until he regained the old track at the point where it ended in the mighty rock-mass. There he sat down and ripped up the laces of his boots with his sharp bladed knife which had done execution on the German, before he began clambering up the broken side of the cliff which led to the tiny track on the precipice side. When he gained the path, he began to speak slowly and calmly. "I'm here, quite near you, Temple. You're right as right. Hang on, it's nearly over now." So he worked along sideways, with his face also to the wall; the place was so narrow that a man walking straight along might have been edged off by the breadth of his shoulders.

Dilir kept on talking to distract Maurice's attention. "Can't think how you ever found your way into such an infernal position! No wonder you got scared; I should have too. But you'll be laughing in five minutes. Now I'm close to your side. Keep as you are, facing the cliff, and let your right hand down on to my shoulder. So. No, don't clutch, I won't run away. Now move your right foot up to where my left was a minute ago. Nonsense! You haven't taken root here, no soil for you to grow in; you can do it perfectly. That's it, now bring your left up to it. So. You'll be a mountaineer one of these days," and thus talking and bantering, he guided the young man step by step along the dangerous track until they reached the bald end.

Maurice was shaking all over and green-white. No sooner had they rounded the end than he would

have sunk down on the ground. "No, not yet," said Dilir, "come along, slither down," and he set him off; so slipping and scraping they descended the shoulder into the hollow below the track just where it turned into the valley of sand.

Then Maurice went aside for a moment, and, lying full-length on the ground, fought to regain his self-control, while Dilir put on his boots, grimacing over the cut laces, and wishing he hadn't sliced them quite so thoroughly.

"Come on now," he said when he had finished, going up to the boy and putting his hand on his shoulder as he lay there. "Buck up. You're all right. Tell me how you got into that hell of a place."

Maurice began speaking in a very low tone, monotonously like an obedient child.

"Pentland got control of the camel when we left you," he said without raising his head. "He drove it on and on with strange words. I couldn't stop. We came all the way here, and down into the valley. I thought every minute the camel would break its legs; jerk, jerk, but it did it somehow. I couldn't get off, I don't know why. We went through there," indicating with a hand the barren enclosed valley among the towering rocks, "and suddenly he dropped off. It was going full speed then in the sand, a sort of awful gallop. I thought he'd broken his neck. I went on a bit, and it turned in and out into another winding way, until at last I got a chance and slipped off on one side, and it went on by itself. It got dark while I wandered about, in and out, and in and out. I don't know where. It was like the Halls of Hell. Then I found I was within a few inches of a drop. Oh, my God!" He stopped with a kind of sob.

Dilir patted the shoulder and waited, and after a while the voice went on. "There was a kind of crevice or scoop out of the side of the rock, and I crouched in there for years, at least it seemed so. If ever I fell asleep, I woke drenched in perspiration, thinking I was falling over that unseen edge. In the night it crept nearer to me, I'll swear it did, by inches; if morning hadn't come then it would have got me. I had to get up at the first dawn and get away. It tried to eat me like a mouth creeping nearer, always nearer, a mouth large enough to swallow the world, and the worst was that I should have been nothing, I shouldn't have satisfied it, just a little scrunch——" He stopped again.

"Well, you started out to find us?" Dilir suggested cheerily, wondering if another of the party were going off his head.

"Yes." Maurice sat up a little. "I got on that beastly path and couldn't get off again and couldn't get either way. Someone shot at me. Who was it?"

He sat up completely now, and then, seeing Nafeesa standing at the top of the dip where the path debouched into the valley, pulled himself up to his feet by the help of Dilir's arm, and tried to smile.

Nafeesa came down a step or two, with her earnest eyes fixed on them both. She did not hurry herself, and when she halted was still a few feet above them raised on the stones.

"He saved you," she said at last in English to Maurice with something rebuking in her tone.

"I know——" Maurice answered, and for the moment could get no further.

Nafeesa leaned forward, and again in English spoke to Maurice.

"He is your brother," she enunciated very clearly and carefully. Then reaching forward she took Dilir's worn and horny hand, and opening the front of her brother's shirt thrust it inside, swiftly repeating some words in Arabic.

"There let him be placed," translated Dilir solemnly in response to the imperious command of her lifted eyebrows.

Maurice took Dilir's hand as it lay against his breast and pressed it hard. "There shall be no obstacle through me," he said with an effort, then leaning forward he drew down Nafeesa's face and kissed her.

At that instant a strong ringing hail from the slope above called them all to attention.

"Aha, the Bimbashi!" exclaimed Dilir, and a light as of a summer morning flooded his dark face as he sprang to respond.

But the news he had to tell was difficult, and he waited awhile until he could get Durham by himself. The moment came, when Iona, seeing the other two, advanced quickly toward them, then Dilir hurriedly explained his tale, half in pantomime, indicating the spot.

"She must never know about his shooting at Temple," said Durham gravely. "It is easy to understand that he might have shot himself by slipping among the boulders, and then fallen over."

It was this version which he finally gave her, and Iona listened with a curious sense of being far away from it all. She was faint with hunger, as they all were, and she asked no questions at all at the time, listening to what Durham said, turning to go on along the track when he told her,

with a sort of automatic obedience that made him clench his teeth at his impotence to give her the food and water she was so badly in need of.

They did not delay long in making a move. Dilir went back first to reconnoitre if there were anything to be seen of their late foes, but, as he had expected, they had all withdrawn. They had taken their dead and wounded with them, with the exception of one man, who had probably been overlooked, as he had fallen behind a towering pinnacle of rock, and was concealed from the track. He was a large stout man with a face more like that of the Arabs to be found in the coast towns than among the Bedouin. There was evidently an admixture of Nubian blood in him too, from his thick lips and dark skin. The sun was getting very strong, and Dilir, who had been unable to recover his helmet, stripped off a piece of the dead man's garment and began to fashion himself a turban, Afghan style, with a neat little conical point in the centre, and two long tails at the back. Though aware his appearance was not at the moment calculated to win a woman's admiration, he had his vanity, and knew that his native turban, set well down to the brows, suited his style of face better than anything else he could wear. He had just settled it to his satisfaction when he heard a slight sound, and saw Nafeesa looking at him with that wide-eyed graciousness which was the nearest she got to tenderness. She did not see the dead man, who was lying on the other side of the rock. Dilir smiled at her and she smiled back.

"Where did you get that stuff?" she asked. For answer he pointed to the body, and she came round and stood beside him, looking down upon

the swarthy face. She held Dilir's hand in rather a close grip for a moment, and then bending down arranged the limbs and drew a piece of the cloth across the face.

"What are we to do now?" she asked, standing up again.

"We must go on along the pass until we reach the water, where we shall certainly find the camels, unless they have been stolen, which is not likely here."

Together, still hand in hand, a rather unusual circumstance with them, they retraced their steps. Just as they came within sight of the rest, who were waiting for them, Nafeesa remarked casually, "That is my husband."

Even Dilir was surprised; he stopped and looked at her. "That dead man?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You are not making a mistake?"

"No, no, indeed, of course I know. What do you say—make a mistake? How could I make a mistake in a thing like that?"

Dilir began to think. "It is most natural," he declared at last, "that he should join the rest to come after you when he knew you had gone with us—indeed, I cannot think why I did not imagine it before. But, then, where was he when I was in Gergaheit? Ah, he would not know me, nor I him. I do not remember him there. It was better so. If I had known, perhaps I could not have resisted also treating him as I treated the German, and it is wiser not for a British Officer."

The way down the sandy valley shut in by rocks was well-nigh insupportable, several times Iona was at fainting-point, and only saved herself by a strong effort of the will.

Maurice was strangely broken and cowed, and walked on in a sort of determined passivity; if he could not be as Dilir, he could at least be no burden on the others. Durham and Dilir were the life of the party, they talked to each other cheerfully, in a gallant attempt to keep up the rest. They encouraged them continually and helped them all the way. Many a time but for Durham's strong and ever-ready arm Iona would have fallen helplessly in front of some little ascent, bursting into tears and declaring that nothing on earth could induce her to go a step further!

"In another half-mile we shall find the camels," said Dilir encouragingly at last, at about three o'clock.

"How will they know the way?" Iona asked in a brave attempt to "play up."

"They will smell the water," he replied.

And so it was. A turn revealed a basin in the stony hills resembling a small tarn, except that it was entirely dependent on the rains, which coming down occasionally in these sterile parts flooded into the hollows. Now that the rain was so long past the basin had shrunk and shrunk throughout the succeeding months, but had not quite disappeared. The two camels had, at all events, found it sufficiently enticing to stay there, even though they had nothing to eat.

They had not shed their saddle-cloths, though it was evident they had tried. Dilir went up to catch the naga, and suddenly discovered something that made his eyes gleam. "But there is food here," he said, looking at Durham.

"Just a little bag of dates and meal," said Durham almost apologetically. "I had not the

heart to scrap it with the rest, and the beast was going strong."

It certainly was a godsend now, and with a frothing drink of camel's milk put heart into them all again. And though even Dilir's ingenuity could not find the means to light a fire to cook the meal, yet as they rested there by the rocks, fed and satisfied, they began to pluck up heart again.

The present was still too over-powering to be set aside, it swathed and enveloped Iona like a smothering garment, she dare not realise all that had happened, but allowed her mind to remain in a condition of blessed numbness.

CHAPTER XX

ALL ON ONE THROW

"NAFEESA is such an extraordinary mixture," said Maurice as he sat with Iona Pentland on the balcony of the Winter Palace Hotel at Luxor several weeks later. "She is submissive and obstinate, lovable and hard, intelligent and positively stupid, magnificently self-controlled as regards pain or physical discomfort, uncontrolled as a spoilt child in her likes and dislikes. She expresses no surprise, takes everything as a matter of course, and yet occasionally gets near to shrieking hysteria. She does not seem to care a bit about me, she is fond of you, and has a wild devotion to Dilir. I'm glad he is going to have the handling of her—it's best as it is."

He was a very different Maurice from the polished soft boy who had arrived at that very hotel about two months ago. He looked now a rather bloodless worn man of about forty. Anyone who had never met him before would have set him down at a casual glance as some delicate man of the world who was trying to regain health in the dry Egyptian air after a long illness. Even his fair hair had lost its colour and appeared almost white. His rounded profile had a kind of ghastly sharpness; his buoyancy had left him and been replaced by a sort of resigned gentleness of manner.

He had played the game certainly, his spirit had not failed him, but the strain had been too great, and he had broken up under it. Nature had not endowed him with the qualities to take great hazards and rise resilient whether he won or lost. The spirit with which he had met the crises had been drawn from the uttermost reserves, and once gone could never be regained.

He had no enthusiasm left. He was sitting facing one of the most glorious views in the world, and it left him cold. Immediately in front of him, over the granite palisade, was flung a riotous tangle of glowing magenta bougainvillea. It broke in tossing sprays against the sharp silver-blue of the mile-wide Nile, beyond which uprose the grand orange hills containing the tombs of Egypt's mightiest kings. In the sky above them the sun was slowly falling. It was not lost on Iona, always had she loved beauty, and to-day she loved it with a new richness, for to her those weeks in the wilderness had been a revelation. Almost she had felt she had never lived before, never looked at the vibrating wonder of nature, until she had met and felt herself lifted up by the quiet strength of the man she loved with her whole heart. She had experienced a wistful sadness at Edgar's death. He had been so handicapped by his natural infirmities of temperament that he had never had a chance, but she was far too sincere and well-balanced to let herself drift into any pangs of remorse. She had done her best for him through years of effort. Even in those last few weeks which stretched so mightily across her life, she had played the game, but he was past helping. If he had come through safely, she might still have found in herself the courage to go on striving,

but she had been spared that. Yet she did not know where she stood. She could not have told herself what was coming in the future. Major Durham had remained the same inscrutable, wise, but reserved friend during those last few days that he had been at the beginning.

When they had at length emerged from the defile under Dilir's guidance, leaving Edgar sleeping his last long sleep in a fathomless gorge, they had struck upon a friendly tribe of Ababde, who had willingly supplied them with necessaries and helped them onward to the river, from which they had easily regained Assuan. From that point Durham had seemed to melt further and further away. He was naturally very much absorbed, very much taken away by his official duties. When the party left Assuan and came on down to Luxor, he had promised certainly that he would see them again, but his manner had held no secret meaning that a hungering woman could feed upon. Since then he had written once or twice to Maurice, telling various details. The camel-men and servants had come back safely with two exceptions. They had dribbled in from the desert, and had given the wildest versions of their capture. The matter was being kept very quiet for many reasons, it would not do to let it get about, and so on and so on. Of course, with the weighty reasons now in his hand there could be no doubt that the wish of Durham's heart would be carried through, and the required mandate as to foreigners in the Sudan passed, but it would be some months before anything was settled. In the meantime he had, of course, cancelled the remainder of his leave temporarily. He sent kind messages to the rest of the party,

and hoped Mrs. Pentland was getting over her fatigue.

He had promised that without fail he would attend the wedding of Nafeesa and Dilir, which was now definitely settled—in fact, he was to be best man, and then and only then would Iona see him again.

The time was very near now, for the wedding was to be the next day, and Durham would turn up some time this afternoon, but he had made it quite plain that he could only stay one, or at the outside two, nights, and the very way in which he had stated this seemed to Iona to show he had no other ideas in his head than to attend the wedding and get away again as quickly as possible. Directly after the ceremony he would depart south again to Halfa, and she and Maurice would start for England. Dilir had got long leave, and was taking his bride to India for the honeymoon. He was not marrying a portionless girl—in fact, he had been rather dismayed when Maurice had made it plain to him that Nafeesa would have what to him was a considerable income.

"I want no money with her," he had said bluntly.

"Want or not, she has got to have it," Maurice told him. "But you needn't worry, it's hers, not yours, and she'll soon learn how to spend it."

As he and Iona sat in stillness, busy with their own thoughts, the engaged pair came out of the hotel. Nafeesa had created a considerable sensation on her appearance in civilised life, and though they had all been guarded, it had been impossible to stop a certain amount of gossip in connection with their strange adventures.

The girl was dressed in the simplest possible

style. Her dress was made all in one piece, a dress such as the simple-lifers wear. It was made of native Egyptian silk, white with a little black line in it, and was fulled into the neck under a yoke, and caught in at the waist with a girdle. Her hair, which had caused Iona many weary hours of work, had been washed and at last all combed out; it turned out to be a fluffy light brown, only reaching to her neck. It was caught back in a bunch with a broad ribbon. She wore no hat, and round her neck was a handsome antique necklace of cut cornelian beads. Her only other ornament besides the tiny nose-stud, which still adorned her open pleasant brown face, was Dilir's green diamond, which she wore as an engagement ring. She carried a pretty blue sunshade and looked the embodiment of wholesome womanhood, fit potential mother of brave sons such as Dilir could give her. Even with the sandals she wore on her large shapely feet, she was not conspicuously noticeable, or odd-looking in these days of individuality in dress. Dilir was in a short coat with riding breeches and leggings. His face was healed, and except for one long red scar across the left cheek did not look much the worse.

"We are just going over to Mut again," he said when he saw the other two. "There is something there I want to see. The difficulty is to get a donkey strong enough to carry Nafeesa."

She understood very well what he was saying, but she was used to his chaff by now, so she did not condescend to answer, instead, turning her back on him, she held out her sunshade to Maurice. "Pretty?" she asked.

"Charming," he replied indifferently.

"Charrrming," she said, delighted to get hold

of a new word, then turning to Iona she put her brown hand under her chin and pushing up the face looked intently at it. "Char—r—rming," she repeated in the tone of one who has made a discovery.

"As an interpreter of what others feel but may not express Nafeesa has her points," said Maurice in the old style, but without the old sparkle.

The couple passed on down the stairway of the terrace, the girl pausing at the corner to wave her hand back over her shoulder.

Maurice looked at his companion. "I wonder ——" he began, and then changed what he was going to say. "You look as young as ever you did," he exclaimed, for at that moment a rich colour had come slowly into Iona's cheeks, and her eyes had gained in depth and vividness. Following their direction, Maurice saw Durham coming up the opposite side of the terrace.

Durham greeted them pleasantly, made the usual remarks—a very unusual effort with him—called for tea and answered Maurice's rather languid questions as he ate it when it was brought.

All the while Iona sat silent, her eyes fixed on the lights ever changing on the hills, and do what she would the hand that grasped the arm of the basket-chair in which she sat moved incessantly, fingering and feeling the wood. She took herself to task seriously. It was all nonsense—she must control herself. What an absurdity it was that she should feel as nervous as a schoolgirl! Yes, Major Durham was here, and she must just give herself up to it and be natural as she had been before. All the rest of to-day she would have

him, and to-morrow, yes—what was that he was saying?

"Must. Sorry. Gives plenty of time. The ceremony will be over in the morning I take it. Can catch the night train."

Well, now she knew. He was telling her as plainly and kindly as he could. He had meant nothing, of course. A man such as that does not fall in love like a schoolboy. He liked her, of course, did still. When he came to England, perhaps he would call on her if he were in the neighbourhood. But as for anything else! It was merely the result of the astounding circumstances. Would not any man so warm-hearted as Durham have kissed any woman who turned to him as she had done in that moment when death was very near? He did it to comfort her, and had probably since regretted it. *That* thought was intolerable, she must never let him think there could have been a shadow of misunderstanding, and yet—— She did not, of course, want him to say anything. If they had not been going to part so soon, and so indefinitely, she would never even have dreamed of such things so soon, but it was all so unusual. Thrown together as they had been in the great intimacy of the desert, one would have thought all barriers were down, that they would have understood each other without the shadow of a misunderstanding being possible. But did they not? Certainly he had done his best to make his position plain. There *was* no misunderstanding. Suddenly she got up as if she had been sharply pricked. She muttered something about letters. The two men stood up, and Maurice said languidly, "Do you know, I've discovered all sorts of astonishing things in the garden at the

back; it isn't in the least like a garden—it's out of the Arabian Nights. Please come and see it, Iona, before it gets dark."

She hesitated uncertainly, and Durham made a much bolder bid at escape. "Right," he said. "Well, I'll just put my things out and join you later," and he moved toward the hotel entrance.

"But not so fast," said Maurice, still speaking languidly, but with a faint added peevishness. "I have waited until you came to show my discovery, and you try to baulk me like that! Mean I call it. Come along, you old fossil!"

Durham followed uncomfortably as they crossed the spacious hall and went down the steps at the other end.

"At the first glance you think it is an ordinary garden," Maurice went on talking. "You see a green lawn and are going to step on it when you find it's all squashy mud with each blade of grass separately stuck in with a hairpin. At least, I don't know if that's how they do it, but it conveys that impression. Then you discover a tangled shrubbery under the trees, and find it's a swampy lake hemmed in with a little parapet to hold the water. You see some royal flowers, and you find they're made of crinkled paper stuck on. At least I don't know, I never tried, but that's what they look like."

Talking thus he drew them down narrow shaded paths and pointed to the little canals running alongside, down which the water trilled. When he had towed them into a sort of labyrinth in the middle, where there were seats and places designed under deep shade for the heat of the day, he let go of his charge, Iona, whom he had been towing along by the arm. "That's the very gardener-

boy I promised a piastre to this morning," he said. "Excuse me one moment while I make my word a bulwark for the Empire," and he disappeared.

They made no attempt to follow him, the thing was too flagrant, and they were prepared to be resigned. It was obviously an occasion on which any woman ought to utter commonplaces hard and fast if she wished to keep any shadow of self-respect, but as they strolled in the direction Maurice had taken Iona found those commonplaces quite unattainable, for her heart was beating and she could not get her breath. They came out into an open place at last in dumb silence, and with one accord they stopped, and Durham, with his hands behind his back, looked down at her. Something in Iona rose swiftly to the occasion; she threw all her little trite reflections about commonplaces to the wind, and with the spirit of the gambler hazarded all on one throw; she looked back at him openly and unashamed, with all the love and longing in her face unveiled. The die was cast, the stake was won. Quite simply and as if it were the only thing on earth he had ever intended to do, he took her in his arms, and drew her to him.

"Darling," he said very, very low.

Such a word from such a man contained all the music of the spheres—it was triumph undreamed of. Never even in her wildest moments had she supposed he would say that. It came upon her as a word fresh coined from the mint, a god-like word, a discovery of his own to be used exclusively for her of all women, and the marvellous melody of it filled every need and yearning of her so long hungry heart.

They found themselves on one of the seats so conveniently placed in the labyrinth, beneath the depths of the shade, and there they sat together, and the world ceased to exist for them. At last she gave a little triumphant laugh.

"You meant to go away to-morrow and leave me——"

"How could I know? I thought you wouldn't like it; I meant to wait until I came to England next autumn."

"All those months!" Her tone expressed æons of time.

"But you knew."

"Indeed I didn't."

"I wasn't thinking of you," he admitted. "I never thought it mattered so much to you."

"But I'm a living natural woman, not a doll, who can play her heart to the tune of convention."

"Do you know?"—he began to laugh—"I always thought you were very, very fond of Maurice, and even up to the last—hour—when I came here, I thought Maurice would have it all his own way by going home with you."

"Yet you would have let me go?"

"How could I do anything else?"

She laughed.

By the time they woke again to reality darkness had fallen completely, and the frogs in the miniature canals were filling the air with their clamour.

They walked back to the hotel and found Maurice standing at the top of the steps smoking a cigarette. When the light from the hall was reflected across their faces, he gave an exaggerated sigh of satisfaction.

"For a silent man, Dollops," he said in mock weariness, "you must find a deal to say on an important occasion. Who would have thought it took so much telling?"

"Maurice, you *dear*!" cried Iona.

THE END

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